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The Absent Voice of Prisoners

It's a heady time in the world of prisons. The "R" word is being uttered in public again, and more than a few people have come to the conclusion that beating prisoners over the head for long years doesn't actually result in any discernible positive outcomes. Having now served twenty-eight continuous years in maximum-security prisons, I welcome this burst of possibility. The past generation of punitive policies just about demolished whatever "good" there was inside these places. The wreckage left behind is an awful mess that will require all the interested parties, all the stakeholders, to work together to make rehabilitation more than a slogan. This effort simply must include prisoners.

There is a fundamental misunderstanding of the reality of prison, and this includes a considerable portion of the professional criminologist class. Prison is a world whose rules are bent into shapes unfamiliar to eyes that have not looked from behind bars and locked doors. Racial separation, homophobia, atavistic brutality to settle minor disputes, fear, and rampant paranoia dominate the world of prison. The least understood aspect of this culture is the sad fact that many of these terrible features are promoted by the guards, by the administrators, and by the very nature of the system itself. A system designed to bash people into compliance, no matter the high-sounding ideals spouted by nattily-dressed spokespersons, results in the too familiar dismal recidivism rates, out of control violence rates, shocking suicide rates, and all the rest of the depressing statistics associated with prisons.

In the past two hundred years this country has perfected the art of mistreatment. Starting in our first prison in an abandoned copper mine in Stansfield, Connecticut, to the monstrous schemes of so-called reformers in the 19th and 20th centuries, to the whipping post affectionately named Red Hannah, to Alcatraz, right up to Pelican Bay, there has been created and nurtured a prison culture that is resistant to change and hostile to
reform. Nothing worse can be applied to a correctional worker than that he or she is "soft" on inmates. Bad ideas, which any prisoner worth their state-issued boots could see are doomed to failure, keep getting recycled. The guardians of the status quo shout down good ideas in shrill chorus. There is an assumption, really a firmly held belief, that nothing can be changed and, therefore, to try is futile and wasteful. And it is weak, by this rationale.

Supporting this prevailing attitude is the dominant culture of prisoners. It is no less retrograde in its thinking, and it works as assiduously at self-immolation as the system works at individual destruction. They feed on one another; they support one another like two drunken misfits at closing time. The one cannot exist without the other. They are lovers, of the most dysfunctional sort.

Prisoners, mostly, embrace the "convict" mentality as a badge of honor. "I am a convict," they will roar in defiance at the slightest offense to their perceived honor, to the merest encroachment into their inflated personal space. It is a spectacle I have both witnessed and participated in through these decades of imprisonment. It hides the terrifying truth that we are, essentially, impotent in all but the most meaningless of ways. It is why prisoners kill each other with relish, while meekly submitting to one dreadful degradation after another with mewling cries of protest, if any. In my state's prison system, as one privilege after another was taken away, as the system ground us down into the ground and into humiliating "CDC PRISONER" emblazoned clothing, we upped the violence against each other. We used more drugs, we created more pointless gangs, we lost touch with reality even further. We threw ourselves onto the ground and begged to be treated with more contempt. It is the nature of prisoners, at least those trapped in the American style of incarceration, to act in this self-loathing way.

But now that we are again discussing rehabilitation as a policy instead of an epithet, the professionals have descended on prisons armed with great fat binders of programs. While I am sure the majority are, at least, well-intentioned, I fear the ultimate results will, once again, be failure. This is because too many of these good ideas are not grounded
in the reality of prison life, in the reality of the lives of prisoners. The last time the tide turned towards rehabilitation, a couple of generations ago, the same thing happened. Well-educated, good-hearted folks came into this world determined to change minds and lives. Though marginally successful, they ultimately failed to fundamentally alter the prison culture and doomed the next forty years of prisoners to what prison is now.

The liberal reformers of the '60s and '70s failed because they simply could not comprehend what they were up against. They did not get that the entrenched resistance from prison guards and administrators would result in a half-hearted implementation of their programs, at best. They didn't foresee the irrational resistance of prisoners, who often feel a perverse moral obligation to resist anything imposed on them from outside this constricted world, particularly when it isn't imposed at the point of a rifle barrel. By utilizing top-down organizational structures, the programs often further disempowered prisoners who felt no sense of ownership and rarely held leadership positions. Not having sprung from the prison experience, a world of lockdowns, stabbings, irrational behavior, and recalcitrant staff, programs rarely were able to withstand the everyday chaos. Finally, the programs usually adopted assumed that prisoners could not make any rational decisions for themselves. In fact, prisoners may be the only adult, conscious, fully-sentient human beings who are assumed to be incapable of making any decisions about their own lives.

Similarly, the rehabilitation ideal failed because it could not foresee the consequences of the inevitable tragedies that always occur. Prisoners will be released, who appear to be rehabilitated, who will do something unconscionable, something shocking to the public. No program can prevent this from happening, and no program not prepared to face this fact will survive the first catastrophic failure. Because of this sad truth, and the built-in antithesis to rehabilitation of prisoners, there is a zero-risk attitude taken by prison administrators. It exists inside of prisons to the absurd degree that the slightest failure is evidence of the complete failure of a program. It is a stick used by the naysayers to prevent the reintroduction of the kinds of basic programs that could rescue even the
most incorrigible from the failures of their lives and the system.

The way reform is introduced into prisons follows a set pattern, worth reiterating, that rarely deviates far from this progression: it is imposed from above and outside; it results in the disempowerment of prisoners; it is fragile in that the first failure often is the end of the reform; it is usually well-meaning, but also usually misguided; the goals and agenda are designed with the mindset and outlook of free people, and rarely have much to do with this reality. This is the normal mode of effecting reform, and it too often fails.

There is another way to bring about transformational change to prison. It is to include the voices, talents, and experiences of prisoners. Although most prisoners are poorly educated on arrival, a substantial percentage are well educated and many more educate themselves during their imprisonment. Surprising to all not incarcerated, many prisoners apply themselves to the process of personal transformation with a fierceness that only those who have fallen deeply into the mire can comprehend. And we prisoners know prisoners. It is that fundamental and simple. We know what it is like to fail, to be imprisoned, to desperately desire to rise up out of the ashes of our own mistakes. We know what works and what doesn't work. We prisoners also know prison. This mysterious and complicated world of extremes and disappointments, these fortresses of misery, garish jewels in the empire of concrete and steel, razorwire and gun towers that dot the landscape of the hinterlands.

Butting up against the inclusion of the voice of prisoners in their own salvation are several factors. The professionals, armed with their degrees and studies, resent any encroachment onto the turf of their fields. I am confident they are not motivated by ill-will, but rather by the sense of entitlement and privilege years of accomplishment seem to instill in most all people. Worse, listening to our perspective with a serious ear goes against the prevailing prisoners-are-not-really-human attitude that pervades the correctional systems of America. It lives in the ranks of the guards and swells up into the management and administrative positions of the prisons throughout the country. It is fed by those who have rode the tough-on-crime bandwagon the past forty years, ever since President
Richard Nixon's appeal to the disaffected white working class, the deceptively misnamed "War on Crime." It is supported by the media's fixation on the latest bloody tragedy, and it is provided emotional cover by the victims' rights movement. All the pieces work together to bury anyone willing to entertain the notion of inclusion in an avalanche of scorn.

My own experience as a long-term prisoner teaches me that rehabilitation is a process. There is no one program, one approach, one methodology to achieve success. Nevertheless, there are some common features to those programs that work, and these are well understood by those of us who have walked the yard and leaned against the railings on the tier. The reality of prison has to be taken into account. On even a relatively well-functioning yard, a weekly, twelve-session group will take closer to six months to complete because of the various disruptions that characterize prisons. Prisoners must be involved in the design, implementation, and operation of programs that are aimed at assisting prisoners. This is such a fundamental issue it may seem unnecessary to mention, but it bears repeating. Prisoners are barred from participating in the conception and management of almost all programs. On those occasions when we are allowed some measure of input, it is usually at the level of bad example, such as the scared-straight programs. By including prisoners in the design of programs, our unfortunate tendency towards obstinate resentment can be minimized. Prisoners, like all people, respond more favorably to those similarly situated who can genuinely empathize with their condition. Likewise, other prisoners will receive programs with prisoners in continuing leadership roles with much more openness. We spend our lives being ordered around by people who simply don't understand the reality of our lives; seeing "one of us" making decisions changes that dynamic considerably. Programs should be fortified against the inevitable failures they will encounter. Isolated incidents should not, cannot, dictate whether good programs will continue. There should be verification of the efficacy of any individual program, but zero-tolerance for any failure is a recipe for zero programming.

There are examples of successful, prisoner-initiated programs, but
they are few. They also rarely last for long as the staff rarely support them. At the California State Prison-Los Angeles County, we have worked hard to maintain the Honor Program, which was proposed by prisoners in 1998 and has functioned in an exemplary way with very little department-level support. Through the efforts of prisoners, their families, and a dedicated core of supporters, we have been able to influence the process considerably. Gloria Romero, majority leader of the state senate, introduced legislation which would have codified the Honor Program and expanded it throughout the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Although the legislation passed with wide, bi-partisan majorities in both houses, after heavy lobbying by the latest prison chief, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed the bill. The prison system simply could not abide the idea of rewarding prisoners for positive behavior, or punishing only those individuals who have violated the rules, regardless of how effectively this approach has worked over the past seven years.

Another of the reasons prisoner involvement works so effectively is it unleashes the primal, desperate need of prisoners to atone for their wrongs. No one who has not lived this life can even begin to grasp how powerful this guilt we carry is, nor can they imagine how deeply prisoners are affected by its weight. All prisoners are products of the wider culture, and we were all taught right from wrong. Having done wrong, we labor under the hope that we can make amends. It is perhaps the most important motivator of what transpires in prisons. That very few, if any, avenues to make amends are available to prisoners is nothing short of stupid. I have often wondered if this wasn't denied purposely, so obvious to the successful rehabilitation of prisoners is atonement. Prisoners want to do good. They would volunteer to serve in battle zones and undertake dangerous missions, donate their organs, sacrifice themselves, do whatever was called of them, if it could result in their being accepted back into the free world. This doesn't mean simply regaining freedom; almost all prisoners will be released eventually. It is more about regaining our sense of self-worth. Prison effectively annihilates self-worth. But none of this is at all understood by the "professionals;" it is
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rarely understood even by long time prison staff. This is something that only a prisoner could understand.

Prison is a pluperfect model of a traumatic environment. It is a world where violence is always right around the next trip to the overcrowded, cacophonous chow hall. It is an existence where self-determination is impossible, where one is forced to move, change jobs, to be personally violated on every level, as a matter of course. Deeper still, the life of a prisoner is one of constant humiliation, devoid of the most basic of human rights, and intensification of all that can go wrong in a life. Friends disappear, family members move on, and the prisoner is left adrift in a world of continuous storms. That this abandonment is almost always the direct consequence of our own actions does little to ameliorate the attendant sadness that is the foundation of the prisoner's life. It is on account of this traumatizing reality the voice of prisoners becomes all the more necessary. Just as the recovered drunk and the clean addict can speak to their fellows out of direct experience, so too those prisoners who have transcended the limitations of prison can speak both to their peers and those who manage their lives. Clearly, no one who has not done time really understands the totality of this experience. I would go further to assert that only those who are still doing time get it. (I acknowledge this last point could be the conceit of personal perception, of present circumstances.)

Much of the daily horror of prison life stems from the supremacy of the "safety and security" posture of the organized guards' groups. Although the actual risk of harm to a prison guard is much lower than to regular law enforcement, the guard establishment has managed to create a misperception to the contrary. They have played to the public's barely restrained desire for violent retaliation against criminals and parlayed it into an unrestrained hand in the management of prisons. Using political influence gained through all the usual unsavory methods, they have assumed control of the destinies of prisoners. Because programs like higher education, drug counseling, vocational training, and community service projects don't fit into the "safety and security" spectrum, they are discarded. In their place are more high-security housing units, higher
custody staffing ratios, deprivation tactics, group punishment, and greater use of enhanced security procedures to enforce the stricter rules. The result is always the same: more violence and unrest, which requires more security. The small needs of the guard establishment for total control cannot be allowed to trump the vastly larger societal need for the successful rehabilitation of prisoners. As the only group with direct and complete knowledge of what transpires inside, prisoners' voices need to be a part of the conversation.

Even in the face of all this harsh reality, I continue to believe that prisons can be transformed into healing communities, using the lessons of imprisonment. Force and violence never produce good results, something we prisoners know all too well. Attempting to apply negative pressure to prisoners doesn't work either. Similarly, focusing all attention on maintaining order, at the expense of higher, more vital pursuits, accomplishes only a semblance of order that is hollow and ephemeral. All gang members come to realize this truth, at some point. Most importantly, to the discussion of making rehabilitation more than a word, the chaos of prison life has to be tamed. As long as a prisoner is forced to concentrate on survival, there is no space left for rehabilitation. Bringing the skills of prisoners to bear on this problem would allow for a ground-up, actual reformation of the prison experience. As radical a proposition as this may seem to some, the failure of the current model cannot be denied. Prison administrators, outside experts, politicians, all the various players need to start talking with prisoners with their ears open. I fear another failed pass at rehabilitation if the group most interested, with the most at stake, is boxed out of the conversation.

Two questions have always perplexed me, both as a prisoner and as a human being interested in the bigger questions of reform and rehabilitation. The criminology profession has done extensive study on the subject of prisons and prisoners. The kinds of programs that effect rehabilitation are well-known and within reach. Nevertheless, they are rarely implemented and usually bitterly resisted. Why hasn't the profession called the corrections world to task for these lapses, these willful failures to do the right things? Similarly, any student of corrections in America
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knows that poor treatment, unnecessary and petty violations of dignity, denial of the basic amenities of life inevitably lead to violence and chaos. Yet mistreatment persists, as if history has taught the officials of our jails and prisons nothing. Why are we listened to only when we explode in rage? An open approach would avert these disasters, but it seems out of reach to most all prison administrators, managers, and guards.

Prison continues to occupy a large share of the public debate in this country, residing as a fear in the minds of the law-abiding, as a symbol of what is wrong to those who feel discarded by society, and as a separate world to we who inhabit its spaces. The voices of prisoners have the ability to inform the conversation in ways that have not been tapped. It is time to enlarge the discussion, expand our conceptions, and open the horizons to the endless possibilities that hide in prison. If the progress of a civilization is measured by the way it treats its prisoners, then this one has a long way to travel. The first step in this journey should be sitting down and talking, that most human of behaviors. I am confident we have lessons to teach, we who have survived this abyss, this darkness outside of view that grows in the collective consciousness, a menacing force.