

**INSIDE THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE
AND BEYOND: ONE MAN'S JOURNEY**

Prison

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The trip from the county jail to prison, a bus ride known among prisoners as “the chain,” can be an unsettling experience. On this particular trip I was accompanied by about thirty other inmates. The scenery we saw outside the grilled windows changed as we headed southeast out of Los Angeles. Freeways, business districts, and suburban neighborhoods were left behind and replaced by small towns, farms, and livestock. During the ride I

thought about all I would be missing out there, all the things I wouldn't be able to do wherever I was going, and wondered what my future would bring. For first-termers “the chain” can be as scary as hell. For

others it may be routine. Most probably wonder if they'll get out alive. I always did.

Once again, my destination was the Regional Guidance Center at Chino. Only this time, rather than coming for a ninety-day evaluation, I would be classified as a “new commitment.” Instead of being “evaluated,” I would be processed and sent to another facility somewhere within the state. As we approached the institution I saw the familiar-looking guard towers, chain-link fences covered with barbed razor wire, and the outside windows of the cellblocks. Once we arrived, the bus passed through an electronically operated gate. Our entrance was monitored by armed guards. It was here that I experienced that fleeting sense of impending doom, the feeling that I might never get out of prison again. After the bus stopped we sat for several minutes, chained together and relatively quiet, until the guards came and escorted us inside.

After entering the guidance center I was again booked—fingerprinted, photographed, searched—and told where to live. Given that I had just come from here, being new wasn't that big a deal. Besides, I was getting used to these places. Yet the time I spent inside in the years to come unquestionably affected my sense of identity and ideas about life. After two months of processing, including psychological and physical examinations, I was

sent to the California Correctional Center at Lassen, a facility more commonly known as “Susanville,” the town in which it is located.

In prison I learned to hate and to do whatever I could to use drugs without compromising my integrity. All myths aside, drugs are hard to get in prison. I learned what it's like to be a minority. Mostly, I learned to see myself and the world from the perspective of a convict.

Life inside is extremely monotonous, although life-threatening situations can arise in a heartbeat. Prison is a world in which you can never show weakness, where you adapt to survive, and where race and “fitting in” are very important. In prison it's not so much what crime you did (except for heinous crimes such as sex offenses or crimes against children—those offenders get no respect), but who you are within that world that determines how you are seen and treated both by fellow inmates and prison workers. And who you are is gauged by the people you run with, how you carry yourself, and your character. And it all takes place within a structure of nearly total control and oppression.

People often ask me what it is really like in prison. The answer depends on historical context, where you are doing time, and who you are. It is different now than it was twenty years ago. It will vary and depend on political ideology, level of custody (maximum or minimum), what color you are (and how that matches with the racial composition of the prison), how old you are, how much experience you have within the system, and, of course, the perspectives you bring with you into the institution. But the degrading, dehumanizing effects of prison are usually similar because they stem from the same structural roots.

Prisoners are, by definition, a threat to society and in need of control. Therefore, we (I include myself here because I am writing from the perspective of a convict) must be confined, observed, and kept in our place. To achieve these goals our keepers tell us where and when to eat, sleep, go to the bathroom, exercise, and work. What we see, hear, smell, touch, and do on a daily basis depends on them. We are deprived of privacy, heterosexual relationships, education, employment (except at the most menial levels), and the ability to attain material things. Adding to these effects is the contempt with which we are often treated by prison officials.

Sadly, most of the hate and anger generated from the structure of prisons are directed toward other inmates. We seldom focus our attention on changing the conditions and people who bind us. For the most part, we accept our situation as being “the way it is.” Perhaps we do this because we believe we deserve it. After all, we are in prison and the guards are just doing their jobs. But sometimes the veils we hide behind are ripped apart as the harsh realities of life become impossible to deny, often as a result of institutionalized violence.

One day, during my months at Susanville, a friend told me that everyone was getting together to have a work strike. Once in the yard I saw something that I never saw before or since: all the races (brown, white, black) were participating in a single act of defiance against the conditions of the prison. Leaders from each race acted as representatives, spoke openly about our needs, and emphasized that this was to be a nonviolent strike. We would simply not go to work until our demands were met.

Within fifteen minutes of this gathering, we heard “Yard recall, yard recall, all men return to your dorms” over the loudspeakers. To establish more control than was possible from the gun towers, extra guards armed with rifles appeared at strategic locations on the roofs of our housing units. We were herded inside our dorms, placed on lockdown status, and fed sack lunches (two baloney sandwiches and an apple) twice a day.

On the afternoon of the fourth day we heard bullets ricocheting against the bricks that made up the lower part of the dorm walls. Above the bricks were windows, out of which we could see the yard, the gun towers, and the guards on the roofs. The bullets made a loud pinging sound like you hear in movies. A friend of mine, five feet away, turned toward me and said, “They’re poppin’ caps out there [shooting bullets]!” Someone else said, “Those ain’t real bullets,” as if it weren’t possible for such a thing to happen. Next thing I know, my friend fell to the ground and said, “I’m hit.” Thinking he was joking, I told him, “Quit bullshitting, get up.” But I quickly saw blood coming from his groin area. He really had been shot.

With reality becoming obvious and the bullets still pinging, we all dropped to the floor. I grabbed my friend (who was moaning in agony), dragged him under my bunk for safety, put a tourniquet on

his wound, and tried to calm him until the guards came and took him out of there. That evening, after things had settled down, we saw the “goon squad,” twelve guards dressed in full battle gear with helmets and clubs, coming across the yard toward our end of the prison. For a few minutes we lost sight of the “gooners,” but before long we saw all the men from an upstairs dorm running across the yard, the goon squad right behind them.

Over the course of that long night every man in the prison was “guided” to what is called a “classification hearing,” a legal procedure that must take place before a body can be transferred to another institution. Until the early hours of the following day, many inmates were openly beaten during their journeys to the hearing. It was like watching a live version of the Rodney King beating, right in front of our eyes. At classification we were asked, “Are you ready to work?” Those who said no were shipped to another prison.

Of the more than one thousand inmates housed in that prison, over 120 were transferred that night. Three were shot and many more seriously hurt. Interestingly, television newscasters reported that “inmates were violently rioting” (a lie) in the local prison but were now “back under control.”

After the strike was “resolved,” I went back to my clerk job in “Receiving and Release” (the place where inmates enter and leave the prison). After seeing my friend shot and all the beatings that had taken place, I had to ask my boss (a sergeant) why the guards had to hurt so many people that night. He answered, “They just want you guys to know who is running this joint.”

Over the next several months the story about what happened got out. People from the state capital came to investigate. About two hundred inmates took lie detector tests to validate their stories. Not one guard would agree to do the same. And nobody forced the issue. To my knowledge, nothing was ever done to rectify the damage that had been done that day. It is as if it never happened.

Similarly, the harsh reality of living in prison is seldom acknowledged. Does anyone deserve to live in such an environment? Does it matter if one is convicted for murder or possession of drugs? Apparently not. Why you are sentenced to prison makes little difference once you’re on the inside.

After being in prison for twelve months I appeared before a parole board that consisted of two men who talked to me as if I were some kind of dog. Their comments were based on my “history,” which they had in front of them in a file: rap sheet, prior presentence investigations, police reports, and the results from the ninety-day evaluation. For the most part they harassed and belittled me with questions about my past. The only thing I said was yes when they asked me if I understood them. After they’d had their say, I was asked to step outside the room while they made a decision. They told me they decided to give me a total of twenty-six months (from the time of arrest until release), which was about what I’d expected. They also told me that if I didn’t start acting right, the next time they saw me would be at Folsom Prison and they would bury me so deep I’d never see daylight again. As I left the room I felt great. Many people I knew didn’t get a “date” at all and had to wait another year just to appear.

In my final years in prison, the perception I had about myself and the world took a dramatic shift, largely as the result of attending two years of college classes. Learning was exciting. It opened my eyes to things I never knew and helped me see that there were other, more important things to do besides using heroin. In 1992 I was discharged from parole. And I’m still in school.

COMING HOME

Getting released from prison is like coming home from a war. The more time you do the greater the shock. From a world where great meaning comes from the color of your skin, whom you hang out with, which bench you sit on in the yard, and where you eat in the chow hall, you find yourself out here. Choices. Kids. Shopping. Women. Asshole car drivers. Pets. Around people who define themselves based on their jobs, how many “things” they have, or their political affiliation. Life inside was structured. You clearly knew your place—count time, chow line, yard line, sick line. Out here it’s really different.

I was assigned to a parole officer known as “Lock-’em-up Tom.” Like my old probation officer, Tom told me he didn’t think I had a chance of making it. He said I would have to regularly test for drugs and attend Twelve-Step meetings at least three times a week. When I informed him that I no longer had a drug problem, he smiled and said, “Well, Chuck, that might be true. But you also don’t know how to live out here. Its kinda like the first time you went to jail—it was something new. You had to learn about it and adapt in order to survive. As I see it, that’s what you need to do now—only in reverse. By getting involved with other clean addicts you might just learn how.” Tom never did lock me up. He spied on me, tested me, and always talked down to me. Yet his ideas about what I’d have to do to make it were definitely grounded in reality. In many ways I am still learning how to live out here. ■