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The Future of the Long-Term Prisoner

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A wise man once told me that the fundamental rule for a writer is "select as your subject something you know something about." I feel I know something about prisons, their functions, and their purposes, for I have been an insider on the subject for the past 47 years —off and on. With so many years in prison, I take in stride the world of high walls, barred windows, and locked cells —along with more recent paraphernalia such as fences topped with gleaming razor ribbon wire.

There are tensions between guards and offenders, but acts of kindness do occur. In some prisons, you may talk with guards on the yard; while at others, talking with a guard is a no-no. That old rule is changing. In 1987, most guards are as young as the offenders they guard. There are still some who have low-down, evil ways, but others are sympathetic and understanding. Some try to work with inmates, addressing their problems, such as illiteracy, lack of job skills, and drug and alcohol addiction.

In prison, it is important not to lose hope, but many long-term offenders do so. We live in a society where men want to be alone. You just move into the cell or dormitory you are assigned to, you leave everyone else alone, and they leave you alone. As in the world outside, some people move into their apartments or homes and shut their doors. I have never seen it that way. We are meant to live in fellowship and harmony with each other. You can't do that in solitude.

"Hard is the guard's or jailer's task." Life is hard for both the keepers and the kept. Walls and bars produce a deep sense of claustrophobia for some and the urge to violence in others. Today's cell-blocks are not the dungeons they used to be, but they are still grim places for the young offender beginning a long term.

I am assigned as a "house-orderly" at this correctional center. I walk down the corridors every day. I see some long-term prisoners standing behind their cell doors, silently gazing out on the corridor from between the bars on their cells. There is a man serving two life sentences who is terrible to look at. He stays in his cell, seldom going to the yard when the others go for exercise. His body looks terrible from lack of sunshine and exercise. Other men lie on their bunks reading "Playboy" or " Hustler." Still others lie inert, sometimes staring at the ceiling, sometimes sleeping the days away. On weekends, when most prison programs are shut down, inmates spend almost the entire day confined to their cells, hoping from a visit from their loved ones, a visit that seldom happens.

"Each one teach one," I try to advise young prisoners. Get out on the exercise yard —listen, learn! You won't like every prisoner you meet, but there is a lot you can learn— some good, some evil.

You need assistance at an early point in your term if you are not going to lose hope or become a psycho. You are poor, and predators know how vulnerable you are. They will devour you if they can, and you will lose your manhood.

Some inexcusable conditions confront long-term inmates in many prisons. Most of them serve their long sentences stoically and without complaint, even though there

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is so much to complain about. Hard-line prison officials say that that is the ideal way to serve time —"make no waves." But I tell inmates that they should protest when their upkeep costs $20,000 or more a year— and they are told that all that can be provided for them is "three hots and a cot."

Most of the few alternatives to incarceration that Georgia has tried over the years have had little public support. Public policies toward offenders are summed up in the time-worn slogan: "lock 'em up and throw away the key." It applies to hubcap thieves, short-termers, or long-termers alike. But I say that it is a sad mistake that prevention and rehabilitation have been given so little emphasis. Instead, offenders are treated as rubbish while in confinement and as hazardous waste when they return to the community.

Prisoners should be introduced to all that is good in America —art, poetry, music, and sports. Most prisoners need a lot of improvement in their lives, but most prison programs are hastily conceived, poorly planned, inadequately staffed, and severely underfunded. The sad truth is that there is only a fragmented array of token services which lack a common purpose. No plan exists on a local or state level which offers a practical, coordinated approach to the reduction of confinement for the long-term offender. For example, in these times, substance abuse is a great problem for young offenders. They can be treated in community programs, but treatment is useless in the traditional institutions. Community service with appropriate substance abuse counseling would lift a financial burden from the taxpayer and lower the misery index for young men in trouble with the law.

The front line of any prison is the guards. If they are not coached and schooled by senior officers, only disorder can result. Long-term prisoners will lose all respect for law and order. I have seen them beaten with pick-axe handles till they don't know whether they are coming or going. Overreaction is what gets next to a long-term prisoner. There is a mutual fear between guards and convicts, frequently bringing about a collision. Daily, you hear an inmate telling a guard, "Man, I want you to stop fucking with me and I mean it!" Guards are the only visible representation of the community that sent them to prison. All the prisoners' frustrations, real and imagined, are visited on the guard. He may say, "I am only doing my job," and the inmate will respond, "You call fucking with people a job? Ass-hole!"

That is why so many guards can't stand the pressure and quit. Positive uplift in an environment in which you must submerge your feelings is hard for either guards or inmates to find. A vigilante mood pervades the prison just as it does on the outside. That is why prisons need constant monitoring. Some prisons have never seen a monitor. They are inspected from central offices no more than once or twice a year, usually with advance notice of the date of the inspection.

What is the key? What will bring out the best in us? When President Carter was the Governor of Georiga, he turned the prison system around by 180°, bringing it out of the dark ages and into the 20th century. It took a federal judge and a special master to prevent it from falling back into the dark ages. Most of the prisons in which I have served time make the inmates feel unworthy. I knew that that was not meant to be their mission, but offenders receive very little from their keepers out of the goodness of their hearts.

A large majority of young offenders are from an underclass. In the next decades —the years with which we are concerned in this issue of the *Prison Journal*— the context in which prison issues are discussed will have to be re-assessed. These coming years will be very different from the 1960's and 1970's. New ideas and fresh perspec-

tives will be required. Twelve years ago, I attended a seminar full of corrections officials along with some ex-offenders. One of the speakers put it this way: "Should we fight criminals or combat the climate of fear that so often devastates a prison?" He was nearly heckled off the stage. Today, he seems less a heretic than a prophet. Today, he and other experts like him, are urging prison administrators to re-define their priorities in favor of rehabilitation rather than absolute punishment. Instead of the detached professionalism sanctified 40 or more years ago when I first became a long-term prisoner, wardens must concern themselves with improving the quality of life for the long-term prisoner.

That goal must begin with the men who guard us. At the beginning of each shift, they hear their officers' instruction: "Handle them humanely, but *handle them.* I have never liked that word. You don't "handle" people and, whatever their crimes, prisoners are people. You "handle" animals or livestock. You manage, tolerate, and try to understand people. Given quality control of the guards' performance and a structured community program for the reintegration of even the long-term offenders into society, both the community and the prison will be safer places. When prisoners are treated like people, the best will be brought out in both guards and prisoners.

Why have I been an offender and a prisoner for so long? I was fortunate enough to embrace crime at an early age —it was one of the highest paid occupations in America. I realize that that sounds cynical. But when an offender returns to the community, the circumstances he faces play a big part in his chances of becoming a law-abiding citizen or of going back to prison. When a man has been in prison for a long time —as is the case with me— most of his associates and friends will be long-term prisoners. They are the ones who boost your morale and offer the helping hand that every long-termer needs. The ordinary citizen could not care less where you have been or what your problems are. The prospects that a long-termer can become stable are very bleak. Law-abiding friends and relatives seldom visit a prisoner serving long terms, but we hear from former prisoners, and our loyalty will go to them. What other choice do we have?

Surely, society can provide alternatives to a return to the circumstances that got people like me into trouble in the first place. I am convinced that parole to structured residential programs will provide the support that an offender needs if he is to survive as a citizen instead of sinking again into crime. That choice is not ours, whatever our intentions, when the prison gate opens for us. The thousands of dollars spent on long-term prisoners are wasted if the gates of opportunity and friendship remain closed.