

The Open Prison Initiative

Part 2

by Steve McCain

Challenges abound for the captive storyteller, for the public audience is only hesitantly, if at all, receptive. Alas, the public is the prisoner's biggest skeptic; justly perhaps, but perhaps not. The criminal justice system pulled quite the fanciful trick when it managed to impeach the only voice that could authoritatively witness against it. It has been said that the great trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist. Well, in a like manner, the greatest trick the criminal justice system ever pulled was convincing the public that prisoners tell no truths. Oh yes, quite the fanciful trick indeed.

Presented here is not a single voice, not the voice of a lone writer, but a chorus of voices more than two million strong; they are crying out in the night, most too fearful to speak aloud or alone. Their plight begs for the public's attention; it begs for yours. Listen closely. Do you hear them? They are neither shade nor shadow, neither spectre nor wraith. They are human – our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters – and they are alive. Their lungs pump air; their hearts, blood; and they feel, and they fear, and they hurt. It is difficult to see a defenseless people collapsing under the heavy burden of abuse and not yourself yearn to cry out. Is it not?

This is why opacity is so important to the survival of the prison institution: opacity is the prison's protector; it prevents the public from seeing the abuse; it prevents the public's crying out.

Open the prisons to the public. This must be our motto and mantra. These words must drip from our lips every time we speak; they must season our every conversation; they must radiate from our written words. Why? Because transparency is the key to reforming any institution, and prisons are no exception.

Prisoners cannot change the prison institution alone, no matter how loud they scream (and they are seriously inhibited from screaming at all); they need the public's help; they need yours. This is why this initiative is so important. As a closed institution, the public audience cannot see prison's ever present abuses. This point was clearly made in 'part one' of this series. The problem that prison reform advocates and activists face in attracting and securing public support is this: If prison's abuses cannot be seen – recall that media also is absent – the need to reform them can neither be understood. Transparency places the public proximate to the problems. The preeminence of this cannot be overstated.

Prison policy makers and administrators, with steadfast resolve, declare themselves blameless and declaim against any wrongdoing, but they are equally unwavering in objecting to institutional transparency. Now, when has any actor ever been ashamed of a good performance? State governments object to transparency in the prison institution for two reasons:

1. They fear public outrage (though they would never admit this), and
2. They fear federal interference and policing.

At the same time, however, they refuse to adequately police their own operations, and they are loath to yield to the public's will.

Who's guarding the guards?

Though the position of prison guard, because of the nature of the prison environment, begs for an education and/or professional training in behavioral psychology, and though a humane prison operation demands it, prison hiring policies do not require it as a prerequisite for unemployment in that position, and the typical applicant does not possess it. The prison system could provide the training as early stage unemployment preparation, but they do not. For this, the prison institution must be held culpable for placing people in positions, and in an environment for which they are wholly unqualified, unprepared, and (for many) unsuited; and for placing them, at least potentially, directly in harm's way.

Prison is an environment in which a large portion of the population has been diagnosed with some form of mental illness. Prison guards, uneducated, untrained in behavioral psychology, and not knowing how to appropriately respond to inmates with behavioral or other mental disorders, oftentimes become frustrated and angry, and respond to these prisoners not with professional compassion and understanding, but with aggression. And aggression begets aggression.

This is one of the principal problems in the prison environment. Aggression drives and is driven by fear; it is a cycle as perpetual as it is dangerous. This cycle creates a river of stress and tension which flows undammed, its current sweeping up all those in its path, prisoner and prison staff alike, and, in so doing, makes the prison environment potentially dangerous for both.

Many of the prison guards, but not all, approach the prisoners by shouting, yelling and screaming at them. This behavior is not absolute, but it is prevalent enough to cause serious problems, problems for which the prisoner has no equitable solution available. The prison staff is accuser, prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner. In a problem resolution, the prisoner has no voice at all. Except in calling for help, when an individual begins to yell, shout and scream at other individuals, those individuals have a tendency themselves to become aggressive and abusive. Recall, aggression begets aggression. Consider how many prison guards are guilty of such behavior: many, if not most. Why is this so? Ah! This is a key question indeed, but it is not necessarily the key question. That question would be, "Why is such behavior tolerated?" But, alas, it is more than merely tolerated; it is fostered.

Cruelty and abuse in the prison environment exist as a viral contagion and at epidemic proportions. These are diseases that have infected every level of every penal facility in operation in the United States; no facility is immune, be it an ICE facility, juvenile detention, Max or Super Max, state or federal prison, county jail, civil commitment facility, or some other. This, if nothing else, is absolute. These diseases have spread throughout the US penal institutions with the same efficacy as coronavirus has demonstrated in spreading throughout the world, affecting and infecting people at every level, from the newest of corrections officer recruits to the most senior of the ranking officers, prison wardens, and top level administrators alike.

Why do prison staff members, specifically, (but not exclusively) the guard staff, exhibit aggressive and abusive behaviors? It should be noted here that verbal abuse incites anger that all too often assumes physical attributes. In this instance, there is no single answer to the question of 'why'; there are, however, many variables that hold influence over this question. With a great deal of confidence, it could be said that, as with many other obstreperous behavioral patterns, in many areas of life, peer pressure is a pivotal influence. As a young child learns through imitation, so does the newly hired

prison guard; as the child imitates to gain acceptance from their social sphere, so does the prison guard from their professional sphere. Prison guards are human, and are no different from others in that they both desire and need to be accepted. So what is the newly hired prison guard to do but imitate what the other prison guards are doing? As peer pressure leads those weak of mind, will, and judgment to abuse drugs, alcohol, and more, so does peer pressure lead people to abuse power: For what is power but the most powerful drug of all.

Why does the managing staff allow and, ultimately, promote such behavior within the prison organization? In this regard, it must be said that climbing prison's corporate ladder subjects one to not less peer pressure, but to more, which demands the ever increasing abuse of the intoxicated (i.e. power) and, as is true with chemical intoxicants, the intoxicant affects a different people in different ways. That said, being endowed with absolute power over the lives and destinies of other tends to corrupt all but the strongest of mind, will and judgment, all but the most compassionate of benevolent men and women among us. Remember Acton's Law:

Power corrupts, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely.

It should now be considered that many of the most aggressive and abusive prison guards were not corrupted by the prison environment, but, rather, were drawn to it because they themselves have a natural propensity for aggression and violence, and the prison environment provides a ready stage upon which they can act out their nature (against a defenseless host – this is cowardice) with virtual impunity, under the protective wing of the state.

Completing this dangerous scenario is this: Under the extreme stress of serious or long-term continual abuse, either as a witness, a conductor, or a subject, the brain will anesthetize itself as a means of protection. It does much the same thing in shutting down major pain receptors following serious or traumatic physical injuries. This anesthetic effect, as psychologically protective as it may be (i.e. it prevents one from being traumatized to the point of dysfunction), is likely what makes the prison environment as perpetually abusive as it is. The prison staff being naturally mean-hearted, or abusive, or uncaring and indifferent is not the greatest concern regarding the prison environment. As true as these things may be, and some undoubtedly are, they are a cornerstone, not the keystone. That would be this: What makes the prison environment so unnecessarily abusive, and what makes a closed prison institution most dangerous is the fact that, under the effects of the brain's protective anesthesia, those involved in the abuse, either giving or receiving, reach a point where they no longer feel the effects of it. At such a point it is said that they have become desensitized; they live with neither affected feeling nor conscience; the clinical definition of a psychopath.

If I were not continually writing about the abuse in prison; if I were not reminding myself of it daily, hourly even, the effects of it would begin to diminish as my brain began releasing anesthesia. I would slowly lose the realization of the reality of the abuse, and I would no longer be so adversely affected by it. Writing about it continually, as I do, inhibits the brain's natural protective processes by keeping the reality of the abuse ever present in the forefront of my mind. My disadvantage in this scenario is that it puts my own mental health at risk. My advantage, more important, more important to me by far, is that it enables me, empowers me, to continue telling the world about it.

This is why we need to open the prisons to the public, to the press, and to our advocates. This is why we need the Open Prison Initiative.