

A Prisoner's Purpose

By Kenneth Hartman

Tear gas is more a presence than a smell. It clings to the back of your throat, a chemically induced fever that provokes a coughing fit after each attempt at a breath. It is one of the “less lethal” force options deployed in prison to quell a riot. On one windy, Southern California day, I could see that the last few wisps of tear gas blowing off the yard as the guards finally came back through the gates, the violence essentially over, the oppressive silence of stifled raw emotion pushing down over the several hundred men scattered about in segregated groups. My heart was beating so hard it caused my vision to throb.

The firestorm of riots that had been sweeping across the prison system in California had reached our relatively peaceful meadow. For several years, we had all read about, and heard tales of these conflagrations that had consumed one prison after another, a brush fire blown along by a hot wind of frustration and resentments un-addressed. A decade of “get tough” policies, which meant in practice, brutal conditions, and a systematic dehumanization of prisoners, was bearing its logical consequence. Prisoners, shot through with the reigning ethos of being tantamount to evil, condemned to de facto death sentences in ever worsening conditions, had become what had been projected onto them.

The United States has a legacy of relying on prisons to solve problems. We built the first penitentiaries, and instituted rules so repressive that insanity and suicide were common to the forced penitents. No less astute an observer of America than Alexis de Tocqueville commented, in 1833, “While society in the United States gives the example of the most extended liberty, the prisons of the same country offer the spectacle of the most complete despotism”. His insight remains equally valid today. It is an American tradition to resort to bigger and more painful sticks to achieve the ever-elusive goal of a crime-free society.

More than two million people in this country are imprisoned, and several million are

under some form of restraint by the government. (A higher proportion than any other country.) A mathematical extension of these numbers, using an average family, results in close to ten percent of society with a connection to the prison system, the jails, and the county probation camps. No society in history has been able to sustain itself with such a massive and bitterly angry underclass. And make no mistake about it, no one who experiences this system, whether as a prisoner or the loved one or friend of a prisoner, is not angry and bitter. The system, which defines itself as society's protector, as the bulwark against chaos and anarchy, is sowing the seeds of society's destruction.

As the guards applied plastic riot handcuffs to me the morning I watched my world devolve into unmitigated and unrestrained violence, the most overwhelming emotion I felt was sadness. Since the age of 16 I had spent all but a few months of my life a prisoner of the state of California, "state-raised" as guys like me are called. A product of the concrete and steel womb of the criminal justice system, there were some expectations I held. Among these, a basic level of order, predictability, a certainty that chaos would be kept at bay. There were no Atticas, no New Mexico State Prison takeovers in our living memories. California, certainly no beacon of enlightenment, nevertheless, ran a relatively stable operation.

My journey through the adult system began when I killed a man in a drunken, drugged-up fistfight, one hazy night when I was 19 years old. I was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole and transferred into the legendary granite blocks of Folsom State Prison. Before long, I was deep in the mix of drugs and power politics, and the well-regulated violence that characterized the joint. Prisoners divided themselves, with the willing assistance of the system, into ethnically-based armies that engaged in largely ritualized combat, occasionally actually battering one another directly, while living a fantasy existence of ascribed significance.

Into this exceedingly simple life came the great disrupter, the most omnipresent of emotions, love. Through a series of happenstances, I met and fell in love with a beautifully complex and frustratingly passionate girl. One of the dark secrets of bad guys, one we all hate to acknowledge even to ourselves, is that our errant behavior is often motivated by a sneaking sus-

picion we just aren't lovable. All that studied posturing and smart-ass indifference is really a mask. Coming to feel loved is nothing short of revelatory. Being a bad actor, when you believe at the heart of your being that you are bad, has certain logic. If you are lovable, then your rationale, your excuse, has vanished and you're diminished to an asshole.

In response to the challenge of love, I spent several years and most of my hair trying to make sense of my life in prison, society, and the world. The brutal conclusion to my search was that I was responsible for my actions, my actions were wrong, and I was obliged to suffer the consequences and seek atonement. Unfortunately, finding venues to perform expiating acts, while serving life without the possibility of parole has proven to be an exceedingly difficult task. I've counseled wayward youth, taught my illiterate peers how to read, and volunteered for every imaginable "good" work offered.

All along the way, I kept running into a stark reality: No matter how much I could accomplish it was but droplets in a sea of misery and failure, a sea that kept getting larger, deeper, and murkier. The very system I lived in, the ground under my feet, was slipping into a fundamental darkness. Butting up against this slide down, I developed a keen awareness, a sense of moral obligation, that coming to understand what was wrong, seeing it clearly and comprehensively and knowing how to reverse the decline, I had to act. To really affect the wider world I had to work to better my world, this world of confinement and failure, of programmatic and expected defeat.

The first ridge I had to scale was the ever-present prison mindset, what is best described as "The Omnivorous Cult of the Lowest Common Denominator". It is, in effect, a surrendering to the worst elements, a way of thinking that devalues progress and optimism, a code of conduct that resents growth and glorifies violence. Prisoners and guards, both sides of the prison experience less adversaries than mirror images of one another, casting their self-loathing onto the other, practice it. I had learned, years before, this cult, like most cults, is based on fear and ignorance; once exposed to the light of reason, all but the most fear-filled and obstinate are willing to abandon it. While adherence to the cult is wide, it is not deep. In the face of a good idea, a better way, the cult quickly withers.

By 1998 as the California prison system was sinking ever deeper into chaos; I became convinced the only solution was to apply what I had learned to fundamentally change this world. A sympathetic lieutenant had promised me he would carry the water for the project, taking it directly to the warden. I began to cautiously discuss the idea of what became the “Honor Program” with both my fellow prisoners and other staff. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that many people, on both sides of the fence, also wanted to see change. There was a palpable sense of frustration, of powerlessness in the face of the onrushing fire of violence and disruption. Change was certainly desired, but no one seemed to grasp how to get it done.

I began to write a proposal that ultimately consumed me for months, during a time when my personal life was coming apart, and my environment was devolving steadily, growing uglier and more inhospitable to positive thinking. The basic principles were clear from the outset: exclusion of drugs and gangs, a voluntary commitment from each prisoner, a focus on a rewards-based system rather than a punitive, punishment-based system, and a need for a different relationship between staff and prisoners. My reading of prison reform material, studies of how other countries ran more effective and successful prisons, criminology texts, and my experience convinced me that the vast majority of prisoners desire to simply do their own time in as much a state of stability as possible. The remainders are so completely trapped in the negative cult as to be unreachable.

The deeper I traveled into the creation process, the more filled I became with a conviction that through this reform the prison system could be transformed. Instead of being a vast wasteland to which tens of thousands of damaged souls were deposited to rot, it could become a greenhouse, a place of productivity and growth. My conversations about the program became animated with a sense of opportunity and conviction; purpose, in other words.

Work of my campaign spread throughout the prison. Most of the powers-that-be derided the very idea that California maximum-security prisoners could ever act honorably. Sadly, many prisoners felt the same way, so inculcated by the reigning ethos, the dominant ideology of the cult of violence and failure. Like all good ideas that challenge the status quo, this one had a

polarizing effect. Nevertheless, supporters appeared from out of the smoke, people I would not have expected, from some of the harshest guards to leaders within the various prison groupings. Ideas came pouring in along with connections to the right people.

The lieutenant who first agreed to support the plan, who had the courage to put his name on a good idea, took the completed proposal directly to the warden, bypassing the “chain of command”. This act was a kind of career suicide for him because it is looked on as a type of betrayal to go around the established order, regardless of whether the intent or the result is good. His peers never forgave him for this, but the program would have been stillborn if not for his belief in doing what is right. The Warden, another oddity, a product of this weakened “care and treatment” arm of the prison system, saw immediately the potential benefits of the Honor Program. There was an aligning of the planets or perhaps the critical mass of concern necessary to motivate change had simply been reached; either way, the ball was put into play.

The howls from the “custody” arm, the uniforms, could be heard throughout the prison. When the Warden handed the task of developing the program off to a Catholic priest there was an almost universal outrage from among the ranks of the guards. The campaign to flush the program began with a direct dismissing of the idea itself. The prisoners would never go for it; the omnivorous cult would burn it down and leave the program a pile of cinders. Of course, the guards who had utilized the cult of violence to maintain their dominance fully expected to simply unleash the angry horde. To their dismay and surprise, enough of the prisoners who had come to see the true nature of their world banded together to create a wall behind which they could stand.

Although the proposal went up to the Warden under the lieutenant’s name, it quickly became common knowledge I was the author. I began to use all the contacts I had developed through my years to counter the forces in opposition. I talked to everyone who would listen. I recruited every strong, intelligent prisoner I could to keep our flock together. Over the couple of years between presenting the initial proposal and the start of implementation, the program and I became inextricably linked. Some people started to refer to me as The Founder. As much as I

tried to protest and demur, the voice within me that demanded my continued, stubborn, single-minded pursuit of real change to this world of mine revealed in the recognition.

For too much of my life I had been known only for wrong, for playing a central role in the cult of violence's one-note act. My reputation revolved around savagery, around destruction and tearing down. I even came to the sad realization that the girl who fell in love with me, and through whom I had first found the impetus to grow out of the confines of this world, she too had been drawn to my negative energy. There is a species of power, illusory but compelling nonetheless, to the darkness of human nature. I bathed in this ugliness so much I reeked of it. When the time came to strive for something better, I still felt the taste for the malevolence, its siren call of primitive emotion and instant gratification. At a different level, deeper, I craved to stand in the light, to be known as one who had helped to bring peace into my world. Thankfully, the latter desires won out.

Implementation of the Honor Program required cleaning out a whole 600-bed facility, of those prisoners too caught up in the prison mindset to seek the chance for a better life. The negative leadership amongst the prisoners quickly realized the program would disempower them. It is much easier to terrorize those who cannot see a way out, a route of escape. By focusing on gangs and drugs, the twin agitators, the program removed both the force and the grease of the motor driving the turmoil. The guards willingly participated in this stage of the process, enjoying exercising power, not fully cognizant of what they were creating. In a fairly rapid period of time, several months, the facility was transformed into a population of prisoners who wanted to do better, to be better, to live as normal a life as possible. Even though the negative leaders would continue to seek to undermine the program, all their efforts ultimately failed because the power of the idea was simply too great. As I believed, the vast majority of prisoners want to live like human beings to the degree possible in confinement.

Although it would seem only logical that the guards would also prefer to work in a safer and saner environment, for many of them the reverse proved true. The one great unforeseen development of the Honor Program project is how doggedly it has been resisted by so many of

the guards; even some of the guards I assumed would be our biggest supporters. I was not surprised that the most retrograde among their ranks would resist anything labeled “honor” associated with prisoners, but I underestimated how many of them would resent prisoners taking control of their own lives. The guards have built a prison mindset no less pervasive and negative than the prisoners’. Within this warped worldview, all the players have assigned roles. Prisoners are always bad, always wrong, and always suspect. Guards are always good, always right, and always justified in their actions, no matter how apparently unethical, due to the evil, incorrect, and devious nature of prisoners.

The guards’ moral issue split them into warring camps; those supportive of the program, the larger but quieter group, and those opposed, the more vocal and determined. I have continued to campaign on behalf of the program, but as positions hardened, it became difficult to reach the other side. I believe the root factor of their resistance is fear. They are terrified their actions will be called into question, or even the very justification for their professional existence. The empire California prison guards created are built on a false premise, that California prisoners cannot and will not conduct themselves in a civilized fashion. At its heart, the Honor Program sets out to prove that premise inaccurate. As the years stretch out behind us, peaceful, productive, and civilized, the earth beneath their feet has been crumbling away.

Six years after conception, and almost four years after implementation, the results have been impressive. There have only been a couple of incidents when the opposition managed to slip some ringers into our midst; no guards assaulted, no mass uprisings or riots or strikes. (No small feat in a state prison system that is, literally, in a meltdown, with uprisings and riots and strikes happening daily in other prisons.) A flourishing culture of positive energy that includes lowering of racial barriers and a growing sense of ownership. New arrivals are advised by other prisoners that this is a good thing, so don’t screw it up. There is even optimism; just a bit, because prisoners tend to be the most pessimistic people in the world. More fundamentally, there is a sense of possibility, of expectation.

The Honor Program has been featured in newspapers and on television. In one long

piece on a local channel, I was interviewed and identified as the prisoner who came up with the idea for the program. Shortly after the segment aired, I received mail from admiring members of the public. People want to believe that prisoners, indeed everyone, are capable of good, of affecting the world in a way that results in an advance in the human condition. As sad as it has been to observe the response of too many of the guards, it has been extremely gratifying to see how others of them have risen to the challenge. Several have gone so far as to become our biggest supporters after initially doubting the Honor Program concept. One in particular, a 25-year veteran, raised in a family of guards, has become our most effective and insistent supporter. Such is the nature of an idea, of a plan, of a worthy purpose.

For me, after these years of struggle, and a lot of bruises incurred along the way, pursuing something worthy of sacrifice has altered my sense of myself. I am reminded of the words of Feoder Dostoyevsk's Grand Inquisitor, that the secret to a life well lived is to have something to live for. I have identified my *raison d'etre*, taking the hard-won knowledge I have earned from a lifetime of imprisonment and putting it to good use; more specifically, reforming the world's largest prison system from within one of its cells. It has been, and will surely continue to be, a hard slog but it must be done. For some reason I am not fully sure of, luck of the draw, fate, providence, it appears to be my task.

Prisons, as institutions, have an atavistic quality. Across the American West they dot the landscape like latter day outposts, surrounded by watchtowers that face inward, designed to keep the modern savages in the compound. Serving life without the possibility of parole in one of these outposts is a terribly dispiriting experience. The most enlightened prison system is still a prison system, a place of separation and despair. Nevertheless, my experience leads me to believe prison can be a place of growth. All but the most defiant of criminals can be reformed, in the literal sense of the word, into better, more productive and useful human beings. Most radically, I know they want to be reformed; they just don't consciously know it themselves.

My crusade to alter my world, to pick up the flag of fundamental reform and push it to the crest of the hill, has affected thousands of people. Even those who oppose the concept have

had their lives changed. The California prison system has a shining example of the possible. The lives of all those connected to this place, directly and indirectly, have been altered for the better. Into this alternate reality of misery and disorder, of exploding canisters of tear gas and acts of desperate meaninglessness, the honor-concept backfire has been set. It is also a challenge to the free world; honor being applied to the discourse regarding the outcasts necessarily implies the presumption of a higher standard of conduct from the rest of society. Such is the nature of purpose, of the power of a purpose-filled existence to affect change. The power of purpose can even overcome the concrete and steel hearts of a prison world.

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