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“Sanctioned Degradation”

-Shep

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It was 1978. Scrip books were in denominations of \$2, \$5, \$10, \$25, and \$50. The scrip tickets came as 5C, IOC, 25C, 50C and \$1. Purchased from money in one's prisoner account each week, scrip was the grease which lubed the joint. Markets thrived.

The cons 50 and older had a room for the Old Timers Club. Coffee was a dime; sage advice was free, unless the wizened coot finessed fare for the ride. If one ended up a bit hot under the collar, a fusee (flavored ice) was a quarter from the fusee-magazine-hotdog vendor window operated by F.U.S.E. (Felons Unification for Self-Endeavor). If hotdogs made the pants tight, a trip to MAS (Men Against Sexism) would be good for some tailor work from one of the "girls". For a flight of fancy, one could visit the Clipped Wings model aircraft club; members flew their creations in the yard on special days. The AA Reading Room was always good for a used book or magazine, cheap or swapped; coffee was a dime, conversation free, and bullshit flowed thick. When the sweet tooth sang, a jaunt to the Lifer's Club could provide a candy bar or an ice cream cone. Members of the Chicano Club hawked burritos on the tiers each afternoon for a spicy dollar.

There were other groups and clubs to cater to the ethnic diversity and group objectives, both partisan and non-partisan. Each claimed its own piece of turf. WSPMA (pronounced WAHZ-muh, the Washington State Penitentiary Motorcycle Association) was an amalgamation of members from various clubs that rode the highways. Some days, following afternoon lock-up, WSPMA members would wheel their custom scooters into the yard and thunder around the track. They lived on A tier in #8 wing. The Awareness Project was housed on a tier alone in a unit separate from the large cellblocks. They lived a therapy of separate change. The RGC (Resident Government Council) was the elected buffer between "us" and "them", The Youth Offender Project invited young rabble-rousers and fledgling felons inside for a peek at the

future. Seven Arts could market the crafts of cons in Seattle. A group of lifers read books onto cassette tape for blind people and created toys for Christmas poor. College could result in a B.A. The week's news was "Under the Gun" for a quarter.

Several of the programs were an opportunity for change, for betterment of the individual, while some were formed for nothing more than camaraderie or fun. Others were notorious failures. One such was Take-A-Lifer-To-Dinner, an idea too good to be true. Two escapes and three murders later...

Individual hustles abounded. One colorful example was Breezeway Bob. BB had his piece of cyclone fence where he hawked the items of clothing from his revolving stock. A booming cottage industry of cigarette rollers sold hand crafted butts for a quarter a pack. Barbers made house calls.

The dark market of drugs and booze (primo and real stuff) also flourished. The market was a roofed and fenced stretch of cement known as Blood Alley. The economy of the market was a simplistic formula; debts were an expense of life's cheapness. One paid or died.

Respect was ever-present, a commodity predicated on fear and the truth of consequences. If a line was crossed, the path led to a blind spot. Sooner or later. The lucky learned. The rest met their gods.

The goon squad in those days was a battle-hardened phalanx, tough and dangerous as any other element. The faster they moved, the more likely blood flowed. Searches were generally based on reasonable suspicion and probable cause, thorough yet conducted with decorum and courtesy.

Then a guard died, 5/15/79. Lockdown. Chaos. The grass surrounding the trout ponds in People's Park and Lifer's Park was cemented. Blind spots were eliminated by new construction. The compound was divided by new gates. But we didn't learn of these changes for months. July 5th, 6th, and 7th were our Kristalnacht, our cells razed, our personal possessions destroyed. On the 7th, someone on C tier, 8 wing, yelled the water was stuck on. The response was to shut off the power and water for the entire tier. It was a last straw.

Plumbing and electrical fixtures were ripped from walls. The bars and cement took a noisy beating from cast iron bases from destroyed sinks and metal toilets. Then, energy spent, a quiet ensued.

Shattered by the blast from a .12 gauge shotgun aimed down B tier, the night took on new proportions. Loaded weapons aimed menacingly, we ran a gauntlet from each cell. Hands clasped at the backs of necks, we were hustled down a row of helmeted, shielded, riot-baton-swinging guards. Handcuffed, we were thrown face down in the dirt where once there had been grass. Baton wielding guards strutted and struck as the warden and more guards on the wall's catwalk above jeered and taunted, one or two urinating on prone prisoners below.

When the wing was emptied, we were force-marched to the yard gate where we stripped and threw our clothing and shoes on piles, our jewelry disappearing. A state-issue shirt and state-issue denims were handed each of us as we passed through the gate, only to be snatched away from those who did not don them quickly enough. We were made to sit in rows, hands clasped behind necks. Maddened guards would make this row or that get up and force-march in a circle, stragglers subject to the baton. Mumbles earned his nickname that night when a guard beat him so severely he was paroled. Mumbles had tripped in a hole for a buried water spigot. Gunfire from 9 towers emphasized orders.

Relief was palpable when the state police manned the wall. No one would aim a weapon into the yard now, a fear shared before they came.

It was later we learned our brothers in segregation had been set upon the following night. Several had been cuffed to the bars and beaten with sap gloves and batons. Carl Harp, the Bellevue Sniper, had been raped, a riot baton forced into his rectum. Several days prior to the guard's death, Carl and two others had taken ten hostages, counselors mostly, in order to force a news conference. No one was hurt. Some months later, Carl was returned from San Quentin to be a witness in the federal trial which resulted from the insanity of that summer. He was discovered in his cell, hanged. By his own hand?

It took a month to repair the damaged wing, a month-long camp-out in the yard. In that time, several men had succumbed to the blazing desert sun. Two nearly-finished tunnels were discovered and filled as armed guards held us at bay against the east wall.

When we returned to the wing, the lockdown continued for some months, being lifted gradually. The gun had won; the man reclaimed power by force. The old days were gone.

Fifteen years have passed. Little of the old days and ways have survived.

The new breed of guard is trained more like the storm trooper of Hitler's regime. They are indoctrinated with a fear of what this place once was.

The new breed of prisoner is different, too. There is no unity, no trust, no altruism. Gang violence has resulted in a younger average age. The generation gap has widened.

Nearly all of the old programs and groups are gone. Some ethnic groups remain as lists only; no longer are there any club areas. All concessions are gone. Scrip disappeared years ago. We have no elected body to act as a buffer; rules and regulations are shoved down our throats, negotiable only if and when there is a mistake made that jailhouse lawyers can exploit—a rarity. The college has dwindled to a two-year degree with much emphasis and resources being applied to teaching English as a second language, which is wonderful on the one hand, while on the other it seems a bit wasteful since most of the students have Immigration and Naturalization Service deportation detainers.

Every aspect of life is regulated and regimented. We can neither lend nor borrow anything; we do so at the risk of losing the item and receiving a tag (infraction report). Everything in our possession, personal or state-issue, must be indelibly inked or engraved with our number. Anything without a number is contraband; with some number other than one's own, theft. In either case, the item is confiscated.

Dress codes are strictly enforced. If a shirt is hanging out of a man's pants, he stands a good chance of being sent to his cell, even if he is on

the way to eat, in which case he foregoes the meal.

Cell doors are opened for thirty seconds, often less. In that time, one must be dressed and prepared to head for whatever activity is scheduled, whether it is recreation, meals, or an appointment. If a man is not fully prepared and is in the process of tying his shoes or donning some article of clothing, like as not he will be ordered to return to his cell and forego the activity. If, at any time one is not in one's cell and should stop his forward movement, a guard in a tower or on the compound is ever-ready to yell in a derogatory manner about loitering.

Searches have become a product of intimidation and oppression. One is pat-searched prior to passage through any portal. If one goes to the library or yard there is at least one pat-search after passing through a metal detector. To arrive at other destinations, one often must endure two or three such fondlings. A cell search is a major disruption; gone are the days of neatness. One returns to a ransacked abode, possessions strewn about every surface.

The ubiquitous order is "Lock up"! Wherever one happens to be at any moment, this order is the result of any perceived situation or peevishness. If not immediately obeyed, one is carted off to the hole. If one is talking after 9:00 p.m. count and the guard on duty wishes, the entire cell is carted off to the hole, even if one must first be awakened to be punished.

A man was released from segregation and told he was assigned to the cell. Two double bunks and one man already in the cell. The man naturally made up his bed on the other open lower bunk. A guard came by and told him he was assigned to an upper bunk. The man said okay and continued writing the letter to his mother. The guard had not left. "I said you were assigned up there. Move your shit. NOW"! I won't speak to people I dislike and can whomp with such utter discourtesy. None of us should have to endure such verbal abuse. That same guard earlier that day had sent another man to the hole for refusing to respond the way the guard wished in an identical situation.

We are treated like children, spoken to as if we were disobedient mongrels. It is a fact of life that people are apt to respond in a manner similar to that with which they are treated. I am a

grandfather and have owned and managed businesses prior to my incarceration. When I am spoken to in a childish degrading manner, I get angry. When I get angry, I must hold it in since going to the hole will interfere with my self-imposed schedule. Every time I hold it in, it gets more difficult to contain the building rage. I bite the bullet so as not to lose good time in thirty-day increments, for the ultimate goal is to gain release from prison. It is not an easy task.

Anger is energy and energy uncontrolled can become volatile. When the energy is successfully expended in a non-threatening way, the residue is bitterness. Bitterness fosters hate and when fueled with angry energy, an explosive combination is formed.

This is what today's prisons create. This is what today's prisons release, angry and violent children. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. In the case of modern penology, guards and prisoners are corrupted equally. Ultimately it is the community, the general public, who suffers. Guards bring the attitudes and problems home; prisoners come away from their experiences all the worse. All for the want of courtesy and opportunity.

The Departments of Correction have become the Departments of Retribution. Courtesy and opportunity are not going to create law-abiding citizens. But neither are they going to ensure the release of violence waiting to happen. Like any other institution, a prison is supposed to serve the public. If there is a grain of truth in the negative portrait I have painted, there are surely better ways to serve the public. It takes less effort to treat prisoners humanely, in an adult fashion, than it does to produce human time bombs. It's a matter of choice. The time is now.