

Doin' Time in the Late Twenty Teens

Gordon Melvin

My name is Gordon and I am a resident of California's prison system. There is a local saying: "Came to California on vacation and left on probation". However, it does not apply in my case. I came to California to avoid prosecution elsewhere. I earned my right to be confined here.

Now just because I have been at this prison for a while does not mean I know it all. Heaven forbid, none of us do. There are a whole lot of sub-surface issues going on. Stuff we regulars and guards alike cannot know about because, if we did, the current controlled de-stabilization program would collapse.

Here is where I will qualify myself. I did some years in Level IV followed by a jaunt on Level III yards before I got here to Level II a decade ago. Sadly, I also have some experience in Canada's prison system dating back to '77. I am not new at this. With that type of education in life behind the wire, I have become familiar with how things typically work. Like I said, I do not know it all, but I know enough.

Prior to the 'R' (Rehabilitation) being tacked on to the California Department of Corrections, life in prison was pretty gloomy. Lifers were screwed. In the fifteen years prior to the 'R' being adopted, I saw one lifer parole (on his feet). California was operating under the premise that being "tough on crime" worked. The state went into a prison building frenzy to support this philosophy and behooved lawmakers to fill all the new bed space. Everyone said Bob the clerk was a notorious snitch. I personally do not know about that. What I do know is he was a Captain's Clerk and not hiding it for years. It seems to me if he was a rat, someone would have stabbed him. As I previously stated, he was the only lifer I saw on parole before things got all warm and fuzzy here in California.

When rehabilitation got re-introduced to corrections in the state (see Petersilia, 2008), the whole prison scene began to shift. In fact, the focus of the entire justice system changed as the pendulum slowly swung from retribution to restoration. Formerly regarded as "the dregs of society", we were now being encouraged to begin rehabilitating ourselves. Many of us resisted, while some others scoffed in disbelief. Few embraced the changes. It was weird. The rules were unclear. Few liked it, not us or the other side. Some egghead somewhere was trying to ruin prison.

With this said, some guys bought into it right away. A few of them got jumped when they tried to pull away from their cliques who were unwilling

to allow one of their own crawl out of the bucket. Despite this defeatist behaviour, the atmosphere gradually began to change. The fact that lifers began paroling from Level II yards around the state got our attention. The majority of us began to embrace the shift at this point. Things were not quite as gloomy anymore.

An evolving ecosphere, however, is slow business. The more it changes, the more it stays the same. Prison will always be full of hustlers, gangsters and wannabees. On the yard, men continue to self-segregate. We separate ourselves along racial, ethnic, cultural, and social lines. “Hug-a-thuggers” cannot be present 24/7/365. Truth be told, there is just too much money to be made on these yards. Like they say, money is the universal language. The temptation to add tax-free dollars to one’s take-home pay is enticing. At the end of the day, “a prison is a prison is a prison” in spite of reforms (Horii, 2000, p. 107).

Before moving on I should mention the ICC (Institutional Classification Committee) process. Believe it or not, a “fish” (i.e. new arrival) can ask to be classified as Black, White, Brown or Yellow. They can also claim to be a Crip, Blood, Norteno, Sureno, AB, BGF, Syndicate, Emmy or Hells Angel. If they choose, they can simply make something up and ICC will roll with it. A Crip will not be housed with a Blood. Nortenos and Surenos are kept separated. Black and Whites will not be bunked together. There are many other combinations that are not allowed. There would just be too much conflict. Housing prisoners must be done in accordance with institutional safety and security needs. Segregation is a human phenomenon. We promote it and we live it at a cellular level. Adding an ‘R’ to CDC will not change that.

I am someone classified as a member of a STG (Security Threat Group) who has been honestly trying to go it alone. My eyes see things just a little differently than most prisoners. I look around and see that many things have not changed a tick. Gangs and gang mentality are still promoted by prison administrators statewide because the Secretary of Corrections in Sacramento, all the way down to the lowest fence walkers’ jobs, rely on it. STG provides the basis for large supplemental budget requests – without them, a noticeable chunk of corrections budget would fade.

The primary reason gangs are allowed to run rampant directly relates back to the aforementioned tax-free dollars. Money in the amounts generated on prison yards has to be under someone’s control. What better way to do it than to cede responsibility over to an organization that is already in place? This

makes perfect fiscal sense. It seems the black-market operators that came online with the 'R' have flourished like none before. Their predecessors were rank amateurs who ran pissant operations.

Now I cannot sit here and put it all on paper because most of it would be speculation. However, from my perspective, dope, cellphones and tobacco now seem legal. The typical prisoner no longer seems to be hiding their illicit activities. Do not get me wrong, I am not mad at them. I had my run and I am done and as they say, hate the game, not the player. I am baffled though as to how any of this supports rehabilitation. Am I still incarcerated or is this whole situation some sort of matrix-style scene? Maybe the last acid trip fried me? Or could the whole rehabilitation thing be a game?

I sometimes get hung up by these inconsistencies on this Level II yard. Is the money so good that there is enough for everyone? Program administrators in charge of daily operations, yard sergeants, all the way down to the faux G's in the housing units? As wide open and loose as things are, the money must be a large amount. Maybe it is all the SHU kickouts, LWOPs and hardcore gangbangers on the yard. Maybe all this illegal stuff is a pacifier for them. Give them free rein so they do not get dissatisfied with the program. Keep them occupied so they do not roll over the gatekeepers on a yard without gun coverage. I do not know, but I can speculate. The problem with the line of thought is: (1) the LWOPs and SHU kickouts are not involved (they for the most part seem to be content with the program opportunities) and (2) the hardcore gang members just are not all that serious about hating.

As far as programs for self-improvement go, we have lots of them. However, since the introduction of Rehabilitative Activity Credit and Milestones, these programs have become swamps. The entire purpose of these programs has swung from rehabilitative to population reduction. If you are serious about honest change, you are now at the bottom of the ladder again. Prison administrators are directing short-term prisoners into programs that support change in long-term prisoners. This further shift in rehabilitation model has effectively excluded people serving lengthy sentences. Not only that, it has cancelled its effectiveness, which would lead to more genuine rehabilitation.

As a lifer who is seriously pursuing self-improvement, I am concerned. At my 2008 documentation hearing, the commissioner asked me what I had been doing and why. She said, "Mr. Melvin, according to your 'C' file, you

have a superior IQ!” She asked me why I was wasting it. She went on to challenge me to sign up for college classes. When I left that hearing, I could not get rid of her words. She had planted a seed.

I thought about it for a while then I did it. Lying about having a GED (supported by repeated 12.9 TABE scores), I signed up for and took college placement tests. That is how it got started. I have since gone back and earned a GED, graduated from Lassen College with an AA degree in Social Sciences, completed 30 units in pursuit of a second AA with Palo Verde and gotten a vocational certificate in construction trades. I am now focused on the ADS (Alcohol and Drug Studies) coursework. However, like many others serious about continued change, I often end up with no classes after making sure to register early. The classes are full of people trying to earn time off, which is frustrating. Many of these men sign up for five classes despite having no intention of taking them. In doing so, they block other men who have set educational goals.

RAC and Milestone credits are now offered as incentives in other programs too. Many of us are recovering gangsters, dopers, drunks and criminals. As such, we attend Twelve Step, Spiritual and CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) groups to help us work through our issues. In these groups, we develop appropriate coping skills. Despite being directed to them by staff, many of us find these groups closed to us because they are populated by men who sit there accruing hours and taking up space. CDC and R has revitalized the process of killing time. These space-takers are part of the great numbers shuffle all in the name of population reduction.

I could go on, but why bother? As I stated, the whole scene has shifted and just keeps shifting. We have got stuff happening that boggles the mind. Legal dope, phones and smokes are one thing; dealing with chronic drug users and gang members and everything in between are quite another. Doing time in the late twenty teens is getting complicated.

But who am I to comment? Despite the possible negative consequences of this controlled de-stabilization program, the lifer release rate is astronomical compared to just a decade ago. We can only hope CDC and R knows what they are doing. Until it becomes clear, I will continue to work at changing.

REFERENCES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gordon Melvin reached parole during the summer of 2020.