

Happy Hour in Shirley World

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The Massachusetts Correctional Institution in Shirley offers a typical example of most medium security prisons across the country. The complex is surrounded by deadly razor wire that gleams in bright sunlight. It includes several low, prefabricated buildings housing various programs including industry, a library, a barbershop, and a chapel. It also features six massive state of the art cell blocks that look like Hollywood soundstages painted a rusty clay.

It has been another long gray winter, another gray day, another gray year here in Shirley World and men have grown callous marching to chow in their loose, gray uniforms. Overcrowded and distressed, prisoners are sick and tired of another brutal winter. Complaints about food and waiting lists for programs are just a few disputations causing prisoner angst.

Just in front of the mess hall, perhaps the largest of the single story prefabricated structures, is a line of cold men waiting for Happy Hour. Happy Hour is this facility's steam-release valve. Prisoners of Shirley Medium know that every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon is the time that superintendents and supervisors meet to address grievances and concerns.

Prisoners wait as long as it takes during lunchtime to question medical staff, property officers, and the superintendent. Here in Shirley, a cookie cutter McJail built in the 1990s, prisoners use Happy Hour to get answers to questions about issues that directly impact their confinement. Communication between prisoner and staff remains the most cost-effective method of gathering essential information about conditions affecting the prison population. Answers to their questions often come from the source, including the superintendent herself, Kelly Ryan, who is usually the first official to arrive. She leads a line of administrators that include the Deputy Superintendent for programs, Karen Dinardo, and the captain of the guard, among others.

No jailer wants conditions that lead to discontent and uprisings, like those in Attica during the turbulent 1970s, so Shirley takes Happy Hour very seriously. Each administrator at this facility understands that communication is essential for the peaceful operation of the facility.

Medium security prisons like Shirley may be home to nearly 2,000 prisoners. These guarded facilities represent business as usual for a public safety policy that does little more than act as a warehouse for bodies until their eventual release. Correctional facilities have evolved dramatically over the years, although not always for the better.

Superintendent Ryan and her deputies bring to Shirley progressive incarceration. Gone is any pretence of rehabilitation. These are labour intensive businesses located in far away communities, representing a redistribution of wealth and resources during a period when this nation desperately needs income equality for the middle class.

Once committed to Shirley, prisoners are sent to the new man unit, designated A-1. A-1 holds nearly 100 individuals in single or double-occupancy cells. Each new man meets a caseworker upon his arrival. I met with Aura, a diligent woman in her thirties with remarkable energy who speaks her mind, while managing prisoner concerns such as time computation, job assignment requests and liaison with prison administrators. In fact, Aura helped photocopy several drafts of this article. She also helps men to check funds in their trust accounts, among many other things. For many prisoners, she is a shoulder to cry on. A woman overwhelmed by making a difficult job look easy.

Though ancient, the science of so-called caring for prisoners has evolved over time. Today, there is a greater emphasis on trying to encourage positive behaviour in order to eliminate violence, victimization and recidivism. However, these goals are not always mirrored by similar institutions elsewhere. A glance through a prison window into many modern American detention centres today is a look into crisis and despair.

Recently, a piece of the facade of A-block's new man unit fell off, revealing exposed cinderblock and water damage. This camp is showing its age. Will it even be a viable prison in twenty years?

There is less solidarity among general population prisoners today. Gone is the collective righteousness that fuelled prison uprisings in the past. Instead, there is a tacit acceptance of conditions by all. Prisoners have grown temperamental, consuming each other instead of attacking problems such as overcrowding, appalling food, loss of privileges, and general decrepitude.

Gone is the burning urge to escape. Prisoners no longer seem to hunger for escape, that age old yearning found in prison films like *Papillon* or *Cool Hand Luke*. Rather, prisoners today stumble in search of freedom in a nation where freedom itself is fleeting.

Prisoners attack one another. Racial division and gang affiliations are minefields here in these dangerous places. Charges of commitment also tend to ostracize many, particularly those with sex-based offenses. There is no shortage of judgemental anonymous authority dividing the prisoner population.

MCI-Shirley is home to every class of prisoner. “Going along to get along” is how most prisoners do their time. There are lifers who will never see the streets living alongside prisoners facing but a few years. Running to Happy Hour to read or address concerns is a good and easy alternative to violence.

There is little spirit of resistance. Instead, there is a pining for parole and the hope of work release. Others wait for appeal decisions or some other kind of sentence reduction. Cynicism from decades-long political policies like mandatory minimum sentencing, zero tolerance for victimless crimes, and draconian parole and probation conditions of release fuel ennui and hopelessness.

Prisons have always been little more than islands of social welfare. Public safety makes these guarded facilities essential. Many of today’s prisoners lived through the beginning of the business of incarceration that exploded during the 1980s (Christie, 2000). Forty years ago, Arthur Okun (1975), Chief Economic Advisor to President Lyndon Johnson, published a classic book titled *Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff*. In it, Okun argues that redistributing income from the rich to the poor takes a toll on economic growth. For years, liberals argued that the efficiency cost of redistribution was small, while conservatives argued it would be prohibitively large and therefore undesirable.

The years of economic growth under Ronald Reagan and his so-called trickle-down, supply-side economics relied heavily on construction jobs. The development of the prison industry solved the economic puzzle putting to rest any criticism. Economically depressed communities across the nation grew as money was spent on the construction and operation of our nation’s jails (Gilmore, 2007).

The business of growing these institutions has its roots, ironically, in the frowzy 1970s when fears and dreams were woven together into a national neurosis. Fear of crime – and of government – mingled with dreams of success (Simon, 2007). America’s dream, with all its promise of home ownership, and 2.2 kids, living an idyllic reality. The dream was a nap and the nation was nudged awake as pluralism met with xenophobia. Race relations, the Vietnam War, and drugs ripped America apart.

Uprisings of the 1970s rooted in rebellion rocked the nation and for the first time on network television America would get a firsthand glimpse of the Attica Riot.* In 1971, 43 guards and prisoners were killed during a

four-day standoff in Attica, one of this nation's penitentiaries just outside of Buffalo, New York.

Here in Massachusetts, only a short drive from MCI-Shirley, men at the state prison in Norfolk began to organize. On 8 November 1971, armed guards and state troopers moved into cells at Norfolk as part of a surprise raid, pulling sixteen prisoners out and shipping them to the nearby maximum security prison at Walpole.

What existed during the critical years of the 1970s was a general distrust of government. This distrust was founded on arrogance and rooted in scandal. These were the Watergate years, when an unpopular war, political corruption and class division fuelled rebellion. America was an economy in transition. Ronald Reagan saw this transition as a danger and labeled the underground economy a threat to national security.

When I began my journey through prison in the 1980s, there were cries from holding cells accusing the system itself of being a racket, a big business wherein detainees are little more than work product. It is hard, under the circumstances, not to sympathize with the prisoners' dilemma. The incarcerated are languishing in hastily built prisons across the nation, many serving excessive years because of newly-legislated mandatory minimum sentencing rules, raw material in a money-making scheme designed entirely to prop up the middle class – especially the white middle class in economically distressed communities all across rural America.

The 1980s would shift prison demographics. Prison populations would grow furiously. We now live in a nation where millions are held under lock and key. A sobering 3 percent of American adults are under some kind of supervision by the Department of Corrections (Glaze and Kaeble, 2013) often in facilities where privileges are diminished and programs are scarce. The Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Shirley illustrates this evolution, mirroring prisons coast to coast. It is a facility housing bodies where privileges are diminished and programs are scarce.

Since mandatory sentencing became widespread in the 1980s, and prison populations and costs began to climb, opponents have pointed to its disproportionate impact on minorities and the poor (Alexander, 2010). The political right calls the current criminal justice system an expensive government program that produces poor results (Simon, 2007). Yet, no politician wants to be accused of being soft on crime, and, therefore mass incarceration remains. The long lines and lack of rehabilitation programs in

penal institutions are the result of decisions to pack prisons nationally. Here in MCI-Shirley, trade opportunities are scarce and the wait for barbershop, for example, can take years.

Happy Hour is becoming less happy, as prisoners find themselves left with little more than empty promises and meaningless hopes. Recently, during a momentary thaw, I stood with nearly a hundred men waiting for my chance to speak with Karen Dinardo, the assistant superintendent for programs, about being assigned a job in industry. Shifting from foot to foot, watching while corrections officers pat-frisked prisoners in line, I looked beyond the gray day, past the blazing concertina wire, and beyond to the other facilities which make up Shirley World.

Shirley is but one of three correctional facilities within this hub. Just west across a rural road is a lovely string of colonial buildings that make up the minimum security institution. To the south looms Souza Baranowski, this Commonwealth's only purported maximum security penitentiary.

Men jump when an opening is called for an available administrator. The bodies of those interested in such openings clot into long lines. Officers announcing medical positions seem the busiest. A grievance officer looks fitfully occupied, as is the property officer and senior caseworker. Superintendent Ryan stands and takes notes, while an animated speaker waves his hands and points to something unknown. She nods and the motley crowd grows. I decide that my request for a job assignment can wait. It does not seem that important. I decide to return to my housing unit and simply write a note. After all, time stands still in these institutions – what difference does one day make?

ENDNOTES

- * For more information on the causes of the Attica prison riot, readers are encouraged to read the recently released report, first written in 1975 and kept unpublished for decades, by Judge Bernard Meyer, who was appointed to investigate whether there was a cover-up of what happened (see <http://www.ag.ny.gov/pdfs/MeyerReportVol2And3.pdf>).

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