

Undelivered Mail?

Jarrod G. Shook

It is unlikely that Omar Khadr ever received the letter that I mailed to him while we were both incarcerated at Millhaven Maximum Security Penitentiary in the fall of 2012. I knew that this was a possibility when I wrote it. I also knew that sending the letter could potentially result in the placement of my name on one of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service's (CSIS) watch lists or in its flagging by the Security Intelligence Officer (SIO) in the institution. But I sent it anyway.

Mr. Khadr was being held in Millhaven's Medical Segregation Unit at the time, probably due to an attempt on his life that occurred in the prison shortly after his return to Canadian soil from Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. After 10 years in Guantanamo, he was still facing brutal conditions and lack of safety in a Canadian prison.

I saw him only once while I was there. He marched right by me one day in the medical area, where we were, of course, separated by a steel barrier. I thought to myself, "That's him! That's Omar Khadr!" Even while being escorted in handcuffs by a correctional officer to 23 hours a day of lock-down in a cell, he still had a serene aura about him. He wore an unassuming smile that Canadians will no doubt be familiar with as he made his way back into society. It was then that I decided that I would write to him.

I went back to my cell and sat down to pen the letter. I really did not know all that much about him. Of course, I knew his background story. I knew that he was a Canadian citizen. I knew that his case was contentious and highly political. I knew that he was a child at the time of his alleged "offence" and that he had little if any choice in becoming immersed in the extremist ideology which he was accused of espousing and which was said to have motivated his "crime". It appeared clear to me, also, that the Conservative federal government of the day was certainly exploiting Mr. Khadr for political reasons. This had made me quite upset, as it has many others.

Oddly enough, I also knew that Mr. Khadr was on a special diet – double portions, in fact. I knew this because I often prepared his food and was the one responsible for sliding his tray onto the meal cart before wheeling it down to the main control area where it would be sent to medical segregation. I was a kitchen worker at the time and, though he did not know it, I always took care to make sure that his tray was as full as possible. I often found myself defending him against the bigoted personal attacks of ignorant food service workers and prisoners alike.

You see, Omar Khadr and I happen to have a few things in common. The first is that we are the same age: 28. Second is that we both place a premium on education. Thirdly, we both have an intimate relationship with the carceral apparatus. Now, I will not pretend for a second that our cases are analogous. The crimes for which I was sentenced could hardly be classified as political, and in terms of moral culpability, if any of us “deserved” what they got, it would certainly be me. That said, though we have different stories, what we do share are experiences with the penal system.

Both Khadr and I have spent our entire adult lives as captives, under some type of penal supervision. And again, I must repeat that the conditions of our captivity have in no way been equivalent. That, however, is not my point. My point is that by nature of our experiences, we have both been granted access to a sort of “adversely privileged” view of the systems in which we have been implicated. This privileged perspective, along with an intellectually thirsty nature, can be harnessed for much good. That is, if we are to acquire the educational credentials which will allow us to make sense of our experiences in a coherent manner and to articulate our analyses for an audience of folks capable of pushing for changes within the systems we have become so intimate with or perhaps be the catalysts of changing it ourselves. It was on these terms that I decided to write to Omar.

I started off my letter by introducing myself and letting Omar know that I was a prisoner serving time in the same institution as he. I added that I knew only a little about his life, but not enough to claim that I could understand his situation. However, I wrote that, based on what I did know, I thought that his life experiences would be quite valuable if accentuated with some academic training and that any university in Canada would be the better for his addition among their ranks. I also let him know that this was a route that I myself was attempting to take and I began to relate some of my own experiences as a person incarcerated with the beginnings of an education in the discipline of sociology. Such a combination of experience and education, I iterated, would be of great value and permit him to make an important and unique contribution to the academic community or, if not academia, through an NGO or perhaps some other organization. I was sure that he had probably been contacted by professors and various institutions before (as it turns out he had), but I humbly decided to share some information with him about schools

that offer distance education courses such as Laurentian University (the school at which I am currently completing my degree) and Athabasca University in Alberta.

I closed the letter by expressing my hope that he is treated fairly by the system now that he is back home on Canadian soil, thinking, at the same time, that this was a great unlikelihood – although now it appears that at least the courts have approached his case in a just manner. I also offered him my friendship, if he was willing to accept it, knowing also that, at the time, my friendship might be more of a liability than an asset.

After having finished the letter, I sat with it in hand for a few moments. I started to reconsider my decision to send it – I was thinking about the potential security issues. It was at precisely that moment that I knew I had to mail it and into the mailbox it went.

Omar Khadr may have never received the letter I sent to him while I was incarcerated at Millhaven Maximum Security Penitentiary in the fall of 2012. If he did, it was probably in his best interest not to write back to me anyway. At the time, he was still in the hands of the federal government and I am sure he did not need to be accused of associating with “criminals”.

Now it appears, however, that Mr. Khadr, through the dogged ambition of his lawyer, mentor, and father figure, Dennis Edney, has found his way back into the community and is out of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and federal government’s clutches. With them at bay, the court of public opinion will likely place the greatest restriction on his newfound liberty. This in addition to the ankle bracelet the Province of Alberta has forced him to wear as a part of his bail release conditions. Naturally, everyone is probably wondering how this man, who has endured thirteen years of injustice, will get back to a normal life. Even Omar Khadr himself wants to be a “Joe-Citizen”. I might not be the person in the best position to speak to what a man like Omar Khadr needs as he transitions into life in the community and finds some normalcy, but, as another young adult with hopes, dreams, a desire to make a difference, *and a storied past*, I think that I can identify with what he might be going through now that he is *free*. And what he needs most is love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jarrold G. Shook is a prisoner at Collins Bay Institution in Kingston, Ontario. Jarrod credits the time he was able to spend attending university during a previous period of release under community supervision for cultivating in him both a political awareness and an intellectual curiosity. He is currently completing a university degree via distance education.