

Feeding the Beast

Thomas E. Parton

It is difficult for me to write about my incarceration experience because the subject raises so many issues, thoughts and feelings. Very seldom do I see simple black and white answers and solutions to very difficult problems that I face as a prisoner. Reality has come home to rest for me. Seventy-two years, not my age, but the average life span of man. Here I am living on a gigantic sphere in the middle of infinite space, and despite all my self-imposed wisdom and street smarts I now realize that for a long time I truly did not have a clue about my own thinking process. Now at fifty years old I have grown very self analytical.

I lay down in the grass in the prison yard upon my little patch of this great earth. I breathed deeply feeling my heart beating and I feel anxious thinking, “what if I fall off?” What if the world just stopped spinning, who can prove it will not happen? How is it that I thought I knew all that I did and not really have any understanding about my own cognitive process? For me, life and the world seemed crazy from the start, and I was out to grab whatever I could with my 72 years before my world stops spinning. I rolled over on my stomach and looked around the prison yard. Some men are walking the track, others are running. Some are lifting weights, others playing handball or basketball.

Everywhere in prison there was a constant drone of noise that vacillates from a low rumble to ear-busting chaos. Men, women, hundreds of them packed into small areas trying to be heard over the other. As I listened, I heard many of my own past beliefs being expressed. I heard the fears, the anxiety, anger, the frustration, the mistrust. I also heard the conversations that glamorized crime, violence, racism and continued anti-social behaviours. Hundreds of these conversations were broken by occasional laughter or talk of God.

Prison, inside the belly of a great and perpetually growing beast. The blacks over there; the Hispanics over here; the whites roaming in small clicks. Sounds, voices and rolled cigarette smoke whiffs over me on the breeze. I heard sex stories, dope stories, denials, justifications, prideful boasts and people displacing blame. I heard all of my own glorious, self-centred thinking at its best.

I closed my eyes and imagined myself out in space, looking down on the earth. I saw this beautiful blue globe shining back at me. The enormity, the spirituality of it all blows me away. “My God”, I think, “what to hell

am I? What was I thinking? What am I? Who am I? What is my purpose? How did I let this happen to my life, not once, but many times?" That is when it dawned on me, yet again, that I am where I am because of my own thinking based on a lot of self-destructive, self-defeating and anti-social belief systems, attitudes and idealisms created my choices and actions no matter where I try to paint the picture.

I looked and saw all the greatest potential for positive quality of life and love not only for myself but for mankind. There are enough avenues, ways and means for all of us to meet everyone's nutritional, medical, financial, mental, spiritual and emotional needs. Yet we seek, kill and destroy in the name of money, greed, race, oil, land, religion, good and evil, have and have-nots. When I factor my own life into this fray I only feel how wrong, how very wrong I have been in my own thinking and actions.

Prison, for me, has become the final frontier of what my life was. I created my own prison, became my own jailer in my mind long before and after prison became a physical manifestation in my life. Man! How I wish I could claim to be a political prisoner or even a man wrongly convicted. I wish there was some righteous cause. At least then I could feel some worth in it all. But like thousands of us, that is not the case. I am one voice in many who set out on a direct path to prison. I developed the character, adopted and created my own self-destructive cycle of criminal thinking, addictions and the so-called outlaw/gangster lifestyle.

I do have a purpose and a responsibility in my life, in and for society. At times I do feel like a lone and reluctant traveller on a long and difficult journey. I now realize that changing a character, a set of lifestyle belief systems is not an event, it is a process. It is a process that demands total and unconditional honesty and a willingness to explore, analyze and question everything about my attitudes, idealisms and beliefs.

The journey began several years ago. After serving eleven years I was released on parole in January 2001. The following December I turned 41 and was arrested for a robbery I committed in November. I ended up serving the remainder of my previous sentence of three years. In 2003, I turned onto a new six to twelve-year sentence for the robbery.

I was born here in Pennsylvania in a rural farming county. I was raised on the farm into my teens. My parents were both alcoholics, divorced, and stayed in other alcoholic, violent and abusive relationships thereafter. At points in my life we lived on welfare and were abused physically, emotionally and

mentally. For me, that environment played a huge role in the development of many self-defeating and destructive coping skills. I came up through my teens in a reform school for boys, foster homes and juvenile joints. I was abusing alcohol by age thirteen. I started using drugs at age fifteen. I ran away from every place the system committed me too. At age 20 I hit the county prison for the first time. I escaped from county prison three times and from state prison once. I saw myself as a genuine Cool Hand Luke – an outlaw, a warrior, a runner. I ran. I ran from life, from myself, from marriages, from the law, from good jobs, from great opportunities to succeed, from anyone and anything that made me uncomfortable. I ran by using alcohol and drugs. I ran by committing crimes and coming to prison. I have a rap sheet knee deep, twenty-seven charges, seventeen convictions ranging from forgery, burglary, robbery, dealing, assaults, escape to driving while intoxicated.

I blamed society – I raged against the system, the judges, the lawyers, the prosecutors, the cops. I blamed my parents, the abuse, my alcoholism, my drug use. I swam in anti-social glory, hated any authority, rejected any responsibility and refrained from being accountable. I made victims and felt little remorse except that I got caught. I was a loner. I minimized my crimes, twisted truth into lies. There was no truth in me. I was a con and the biggest con I had done was the job I had done on myself. I adapted and I conformed in prison, but I never changed. I was “all the right answers man”. In groups I said what they wanted to hear, did the right things, kept a low profile to once again win my freedom only to return or continue on with the same destructive mindset and lifestyle. Sex, drugs, booze, let’s rock and roll man – easy money, no effort, no responsibility on my shoulders.

Here I sat again, July 2002, in my counsellor’s office that I had left “for good” I swore just a little over a year earlier. My counsellor sat at the desk staring at me. I felt sweaty and anxious like I always did when around someone in authority. The counsellor had also supported me for parole. She broke the uncomfortable silence with a simple question: “Mr. Parton, what happened?” The words that came out of my mouth seemed surreal. I looked up into her eyes, raised my hands and said: “This is who I am, this is where I belong”. The light came on, the big click, like an emergency generator kicking in. I felt disconnected. That was the first honest and factual insight I had made about my life in twenty plus years of doing time. I had finally owned a small but precious piece of truth about my real character. I was tired, had nothing more to lose or hide. I remember thinking, “Wait a

minute. What the hell was that?"

What purpose from that point on was, and still is, to identify those belief systems that continually drove me towards my criminal actions, and as much as possible, to also share my journey of healing and recovery with others. As I began to work on changing my thinking I began to grasp the idealism and feeling of freedom. How I defined freedom before was in my desire for the unrestricted, unrestrained ability to live a hedonistic lifestyle. In my life I would do what I wanted almost impulsively. I would take what I wanted regardless of the laws I had to break or the people who got hurt in the process. I rarely measured the consequences.

The way I define freedom today is my deliberate surrender to truth, the ability to listen for and communicate the truth. Today I strive to accept the idealisms of justice and the values, morals and standards of our society. I realize that no government and no authority is perfect and some you need to make a stand against, but not for criminal reasons. In order to affect change in my life I have to question and analyze every thought and choice of actions. Is this healthy? Is this productive? What am I basing my thoughts and feelings on?

It sounds simple enough, I suppose, but I found it one of the hardest tasks in my life. "To know thyself". How does one human being come to a place where he or she can take another person's life? How did I get to a place in my thinking where I could shove a weapon in someone's face and rob them? How does a drug dealer not think they are doing wrong or see how the drugs they sell impacts the addict and society as a whole? How does stumbling into a vehicle drunk or stoned become so different than a loaded gun? The only real difference for me is how I manipulate facts and my own belief systems.

Here is a prime example of what I am saying. I live in the United States, in the state of Pennsylvania. In an 18-month period from mid-year 2008, into late 2009, in the city of Philadelphia, seven police officers were killed. A majority of them shot to death while responding to crimes in progress by men out on parole who had long-extensive criminal histories. As a result legislation has been passed that has radically changed our laws and the parole process here in Pennsylvania. There is almost always a knee-jerk reaction to such extreme violence and for the actions of a few, thousands pay the price.

The topic of these cop shootings came up in a group I was attending

ironically entitled “Thinking for a change”. The counsellors’ solution was to take all guns from cops and criminals alike. From my peers I heard things like cops set people up and other justifications as to why cops deserve to be shot. Some suggested that if cops simply stayed out of their neighbourhoods and let them sling drugs then they would not get shot. Now, I am a long-time offender and have been a violent one at times. But I sat there astounded at the insanity of these lines of reasoning. Here we were in a class about thinking for a change. Thinking about the same way we did that brought us to prison. It was painfully obvious that some of the people in the room did not have a clue. That is the depth of this ingrained self-deceptiveness of anti-social thinking. It gets so deeply rooted into every aspect of our belief systems.

I know for myself, and many others, the birth of such thought processes began early in our lives from environmental, social, and economic standards of living. I did not roll out of my mother’s womb toting a .357 revolver and robbing people. I know a lot of my character and personality developed by the age of twelve and was definitely influenced by my parents’ alcoholism and the abuse suffered as a child. Also the violence, isolation and rejection I experienced through the juvenile justice system played a part. We ended up in prisons from all walks and stations in life. We come from cities, from the country, from trailers and from the projects. We come from the financially able and influential down to the poor and welfare families. There are the few who had everything from families who gave everything and still made the wrong choices. We come from broken families who created broken kids. We come as alcoholics and drug addicts. Some have made one self-destructive choice, others repeat them over and over. Then too, unfortunately, there are people who will never change no matter what you do to teach them, they just refuse to see any truth because the effort is far too reaching for them. Some grow colder and harder pressed under the weight of never ending sentences as time slowly passes, lacking less and less empathy. They like to coin the term, “aging them out”.

No matter where we come from, we have one common thread. Each of us has developed an anti-social belief system that becomes a direct path into the belly of the beast. Once swallowed up by the correctional system, the prison environment only begins to fine tune your negative thinking process. In the beast, abnormal becomes normal as the environment thrives on violence, force, lies manipulations and thousands of other twisted games we play to survive inside. Once you dance with the beast, the beast do not

change, the beast changes you.

We come out of the system worse than when we came in. We are angry, frustrated and confused. We believe ourselves to be outside the laws, the rules and the norms of society. The beast has taught us well that we do not fit in, we do not belong outside prison walls and fences. We make enemies of the system, we trust no one, especially not the cops, the judges and no authority. We become trapped in these idealisms of blaming others for the path we chose. I developed extensive rationales from my incarceration experience for my irresponsibility and lawlessness. I painted myself the victim of elaborate conspiracies, of racist systems, parents, shortcomings of society and of addictions. Now understand me – I do believe that many of those rationales are based in factual truths and you are what you learn. That is the power and the deceptiveness of what you learn while incarcerated. We buy into all these lies. My thinking created a trap, a cycle of self-fulfilling, self-defeating and destructive actions created by my own belief systems. These are belief systems impacted by the past, how we are raised, the role of society, our peers, demographics, addictions abuse and especially the entire incarceration experience

“This is who I am. This is where I belong”. When I made that statement several years ago I had finally come to terms with myself. A simple truth and hope birthed in my heart and mind. I then understood, “This is not who I have to continue to be”. Since then it has been a hard work in progress. It has been a selfish and sometimes lonely journey. The more I change, the more alien I now feel in prison with so many cons still trapped inside the same old mindset. There is nothing good or life changing about prison. Prison’s main purpose is to punish and separate the criminal from society. And I do understand that society has a right to be free from criminals preying on them. But the system is flawed in its half-hearted attempts at rehabilitation and over ninety per cent of all women and men incarcerated will one day be returned to society.

The mental, emotional and physical condition in which they exit prison should be a major concern to society as well as the criminal being punished for his or her crime. The way that prisons function at this time only perpetuates the alienation and anti-social mindset of many of its captives. Continued criminal thinking processes, separation from society creates a great gulf between us and them. The effect of incarceration only reinforces these anti-social idealisms. Not only are we locked away from society, but while incarcerated we are constantly judged and rejected, but given no tools

to come out of it differently. The beast grinds you up and spits you out. We live in these abnormal prison societies growing further from reconnection, two men to a cell, which is no bigger than a small bathroom. We live in groups, gangs and small clicks dressed in the same drab prison uniform with the Department of Corrections stamped on our backs. We are ridiculed by staff – often small-minded men in superman uniforms who find salvation with the high paying jobs demeaning prisoners. The whole system is an ever-present reminder of our continued separation and categorization as convicts perpetuating our mindsets.

We are pressed under the division of race, attitudes of controlling staff members who often abuse their power and authority. Some even seem to thrive and get off on it. Please allow me to qualify these statements about staff. There are on exception a few who actually do care. There are a few who refuse to lie on misconduct forms. There are a few who try to ensure a sick prisoner receives proper medical treatment. There are a few who actually counsel and make a valiant effort to help prisoners rehabilitate. These few pay a price from peers who alienate them, call them bleeding hearts, convict lovers and harass their efforts on all levels.

Often the system, the beast, and the people who work in it strive to remind us daily that we are only convict scum and deserve whatever abuse, treatment or lack of treatment we receive. It is important that we realize that politicians and legislators help build their careers upon platforms of fear created by the crimes we commit. The last thing I want to do is to pass blame. As individuals we must come to terms with the bottom line; our actions fuel the correctional industry. In the 1980s there were fewer than 10 state prisons in Pennsylvania. With the passing of legislation creating mandatory minimums and excessive sentencing practices and the unwritten procedures that violent offenders serve upward to eighty-five per cent of their maximum sentences, the beast grew enormously. In the 1980s the state budget for corrections was twenty-seven million. The prison complex in Pennsylvania has grown to a fat 28 state prisons at a cost of 2.2 billion dollars. And by the way, seventy-two percent of that goes toward staffing costs, not in housing costs such as food and clothing for prisoners. We feed this beast and few among us is standing up to say it. Instead of dropping out of the system we drop in.

We come into these prison environments that are filled with micro sub-cultures. We separate ourselves by gang affiliations, race, according to geographic locations, types of crimes and our religious affiliations. These

micro-cultures thrive in prison and are steeped in affirmation of anti-social criminal thinking attitudes and remains one of the main reasons rehabilitative efforts fail. We make the system's job easier for them by dividing and conquering ourselves. We perpetuate our own criminal attitudes. For the most part, when we do participate in therapeutic programs it is simply in an effort to gain our release and not for making any change. These groups are generally non-confrontational. They are hardly ever facilitated effectively. For these reasons, our distorted thinking processes are rarely confronted or addressed on any real level. Prison becomes a revolving door of recidivism.

In conclusion, I have found that the answer is not, and never will be found outside me. I must first make a change in my own thinking. The exodus out of the beast's belly becomes a solo journey, one that takes great effort and determination. The system will not help you and will be suspicious, if not at times determined to see you fail, as will your peers. So you are warned. Be prepared. Let us have a true blue grassroots movement behind these walls and fences. More and more of us need to find our own real ways to achieve self-fulfilling and lasting change. I have to believe there is a better life at the end of my efforts, a greater path. Seventy some odd years, on average, and my world stops spinning. I, for one, will not feed the beast another time. There are no outlaws or gangsters. It is an illusion – a lie that the system helps create. No one gets out alive following that mentality. Here is the stripped down, bare-knuckle truth; thinking leads to actions, and our actions *always* have consequences. No matter the how or why of ending up in prison, from the rocking of the cradle to the rolling of hearse, it all starts and ends in our own minds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas E. Parton was born in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania in 1958. A self-proclaimed country boy from head to toe, he graduated high school in 1977 from Canton High and served two years in the United States Air Force where he received an honourable discharge. Through the 1980s he began his involvement with alcohol and drugs, which cumulated into criminal activity and years of incarceration. While incarcerated he taught himself how to read and write music, as well as play guitar. He served his time doing art and leather craft, while also earning an Associates Degree from Penn State University in 1993. Having recently been granted parole, he plans to continue his education and earn a Certified Addiction Counselling (CAC) training accreditation to work as a drug and alcohol dependency counsellor.