

Reflections on My First “Free” Prisoners’ Justice Day “Petey”

This is my first “free” Prisoners’ Justice Day. I use the word “free” because I am no longer spending this day in prison, but I use the word loosely because my friends are still trapped within those concrete walls and razor wire fences. My heart is with them. As Eugene Debs said, “While there is a soul in prison, I am not free”. My situation is very unique, as I am serving a youth sentence, but have been thrown into the adult system part-way through.

I was in juvie or in a “Youth Centre”, for nearly two years. It felt like a dumping ground for young people with mental health issues. But this was not a hospital, it was a prison – our mental health was not their responsibility. Instead, staff’s focus was on control and limiting our movement. Being surrounded by girls with severe emotional baggage was scary and traumatizing, mainly because they were *children*. I used to try to talk them out of slashing. Sometimes it worked and other times I bandaged their wounds. Seeing what this system does to children who need help left me so frustrated and angry. I was helpless against this system, so I lashed out at myself. I would punch the brick walls of the prison, rupturing my knuckles against the bricks until the walls were covered with blood. I could literally say that my blood was on *them*.

There were so many days when I wanted out because I could not handle it anymore. Not out of prison, just out, away. I came so close to giving up that my own thoughts scared me. People told me to take it one day at a time. But one day has room for so many tears and so much heartache. “Tomorrow” was impossibly far away. I often had to slow it down and count the *seconds*, curled into a tight little ball in the corner of my cell, where no one could hurt me or reach me. Hearing about my young friends getting out and being dropped right back into the dangerous places they came from was frustrating as hell. These were good kids, smart kids, but how could they break away from a bad life if no one helped them?

The prison was an abusive warehouse. I would hear snippets of this one kid dying from an overdose, this other kid getting pregnant when she was 12, or another one being on the run and smoking crack. Many came back on new charges or for breaching their community supervision orders. I vowed never to be one of those. One of my young friends hung herself in the prison when I was still there and by some miracle was cut down just before it would have been too late. That gave me nightmares for months.

I was involuntarily transferred to Vanier in 2007 because I had turned 20. Vanier is an adult provincial institution, but we call it “the bucket”. The transfer had nothing to do with the fact that I was deemed low risk or that I was a “model prisoner”. I simply “grew out” of the youth system. The screws in Vanier made fun of me for being so young. I was under 23-hour lock down with a cellmate and so many times we did not even get our one hour because the screws were dealing with an incident somewhere else in the prison. My mattress was on the floor, by the steel toilet. This is where I learned about the “bird bath”, which is washing yourself, and your socks and underwear, in the little steel sink in the cell because you cannot shower or do laundry for days. At night I could not sleep because women were wailing, crying for their children, and banging their heads against their steel cell doors and concrete walls.

Just to remind me not to take these “luxuries” at the “Milton Hilton” for granted, we would get strip searched roughly three times a week, and our cells would be turned upside down and inside out for “security purposes”. I used to make origami flowers, but guards would crush them “just in case I was hiding drugs”. I had to fight tooth and nail to continue the university course I started in juvie. I used to cry because my course papers would get separated, thrown around and ripped during searches. Was the only way to check if there were drugs or weapons in my loose papers to rip them? This was my introduction into the adult system. This was supposed to rehabilitate me.

In mid-October 2007, everything went quiet. A 19 year old girl had committed suicide at Grand Valley. A few screws told me, “You’re next, Y.O.” Two weeks later I was ordered to pack my “shit” because I was going to GVI.

They kept me in maximum security for five months. Everyone was super sensitive because I was only a year older than the girl who just died. I could not move off of the maximum security unit – for example, to go to Healthcare – without the halls being cleared and shut down. I had to be handcuffed, shackled, with two guards at my side. Not because I was dangerous, but because I was new. This type of standard protocol really messed with my head and almost destroyed me. I wasn’t dangerous – I was sentenced as low risk, and just came from serving two years *incident free*, so why was I being shackled? Those made me want to fit the label and start causing shit. On top of this, maximum security was so lonely. The other

women were at least ten years older than I was, so I felt very secluded, which made me even more depressed.

After finally escaping from the clutches of maximum security, I was bunked with a young girl who slashed herself up something fierce two weeks later. I was woken up at one in the morning and instructed to leave our cell so it could be sealed for investigation. My cellmate was shipped to a psychiatric hospital and my nightmares got worse.

I asked to please be moved to a single cell, but instead got another cellmate, who I was told was more “stable”. Ten days later, I came back to find she was gone. When I asked what happened, it turned out she was in segregation on suicide watch. I was starting to think that there was something wrong with *me* because everyone around me was sick of living and I had no idea how to handle this kind of guilt. Guards in the prison treated these situations as normal and that I should just get used to it. I could not wrap my head around that kind of thinking, so I was left alone, hurt and confused. Several women died while I was at GVI and the injustice of them dying away from their families really weighed heavily on me.

Here is a quote from Correctional Service of Canada’s (CSC) website about Grand Valley: “The Institution provides a positive and supportive environment focused mainly on women’s timely and safe reintegration”. Did they forget to tell this to the 19 year old who suffocated herself? Where was my “positive and supportive environment”? I did not receive a single day pass out of GVI in my two and a half years there, even though I remained incident free. CSC miscalculated my Parole Eligibility dates and by the time everything was sorted out, I was released on my Statutory Release (mandatory release at two-thirds of your sentence). I guess we have a very different definition of “timely and safe reintegration”.

The guards did not know what to do with me because I was a kid. The youth system did not know what to do with me because I was legally an adult. GVI and the youth system failed to implement the spirit of *Creating Choices* as it was outlined because they prevented me from providing meaningful or *any* input into my rehabilitation and reintegration. I didn’t have a choice. As someone with a youth sentence, I am legally supposed to have more protection because children do not have a voice. For some reason that did not happen. Even now, the youth and adult systems cannot make up their minds about who is in charge of my sentence, and I am stuck in the middle with nothing.

The only choice I had in prison was to end my life and stop the confusing torment or suffer through years of irrational pain at the hands of two

incompetent systems in hopes of somehow making a difference. My need to disseminate the seeds of truth about the system outweighs my yearning for death. I spent six years wishing to die. Now I want to work in alliance with those at risk and those who have been criminalized so they see that they are not the ones who are wrong – it is the prison system that does more harm than good.

These people who are dying in prison are not gun toting maniacs who must be slain for the protection of the public. They are dying because the government has not given them a fair shot at life. They are dying because the abuse, oppression and isolation in prison exacerbate their mental anguish – making death seems sweeter than jail. These people are dying because guards watch them hang and slice themselves, and do nothing to stop it, or better yet, because panic buttons do not work. The very systems that the government claims are put into place to protect us are watching us die. And some of us are children. This has to stop.

How many more children have to die in custody before people are convinced that prisons do not work? How many more children have to become orphans because their mothers and fathers have died in prison? I am pissed off and terrified at what the Conservative Government is trying to do right now. Stephen Harper’s ‘tough on crime’ approach will only lead to more imprisonment and longer sentences. If so many people are dying because of the way prison is *now*, what do you think will happen if these bills are passed? These families only want to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives and Stephen Harper is trying to render this impossible “for the good of us all”.

To quote Prisonjustice.ca, “Wherever you find the shackles of oppression you also find the spirit of resistance”. I am choosing to resist oppression and injustice. I am also remembering the spirits of those who have resisted, and who were consumed by a cruel and evil system. I was so close to being among them. I am fighting so that children like me, children who are told they have no voice, will prove the system wrong.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“Petey” is a recently released woman who was charged and sentenced as a young offender, and who served much of her sentence in an adult facility. She is currently attending university and wishes to work in the area of human rights.