Acceptable Casualties

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Abstract

During the last 20 years, there has been a profound change in the manner in which women are treated within the criminal justice system, as well as the impact of those experiences on their post-prison life. This has been the result of more expansive law enforcement efforts, stiffer drug sentencing laws, and post-conviction barriers to re-entry that uniquely affect women. The prison experience itself has a devastating impact on a woman's psychological and physical being; creating a punishment that reaches far beyond the prison walls. In addition to the information garnered from penological literature, this paper utilizes personal accounts of an ex-convict and her interactions with prisoners to provide a critical look at life and culture hidden behind the razor wire. The threat these women are believed to embody represents a failure to acknowledge the damaging effects of even limited incarceration. Despite the dramatic increase in the number of women incarcerated in the United States, scholars still know very little about the culture that is unique to prisoners, the pernicious nature of the incarceration experience, or the more subtle nuances of what it truly means to be a "criminal" in modern society. This manuscript then, seeks to increase awareness, fill the scholarly void, and stimulate a more constructive discourse regarding the nature of incarcerating women.

Introduction: A Personal Statement

When I was first incarcerated, everything was so foreign. The hard part for me was trying to reconcile the dissonance in my head of where I had come from and how far I had fallen. Even now, when I close my eyes, I can still see, and smell, and hear the inside of the prison. Some days it feels so heavy and tangible. As a first time prisoner, I found myself in an extremely confusing and chaotic world where nothing seemed to make sense and time seemed to stand still. The constant struggle to take in everything and everyone around me left me sick and exhausted. There were so many rules and expectations, some were written, most were not. It does not take a prisoner long to realize there are Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP) guidelines, and then there are convict guidelines; strict adherence to both

is necessary. Coming to grips with the actuality of my new found criminal status and the constant reminders of my failed life filled me with dread. The lack of hope I felt when I thought about what life would hold for me upon release consumed me. I was one of "them" now, and only recently have I been able to fully appreciate how deeply I would be changed. Fragments of my time at FCI Tallahassee, and glimpses of people I met along the way, still find their way into my dreams.

> The sound of a person walking in leg irons is unmistakable, strangely rhythmic and melodic. Maybe it's the paper shoes, a muffled rustling on the cement. How strange to see a woman hunched over in an ill-fitted carrot suit (the orange government issued jumpsuit), hands and feet bound, faces that are empty and expressionless, following a guard clearly unconcerned as he walks quickly and without emotion. I hear the jingling of chains in my sleep, I wonder how long it will take me to get used to this world – to watching the arrival ceremony of new shipments; to the knot in my stomach that won't go away; until I see myself the way others do, as insignificant and worthless (Olson, 2004).

This paper is limited to general observations, personal perspectives, and broad themes regarding one prisoner's carceral experience. In reading this manuscript, it is important that the reader knows that I (Olson) was a non-violent, first-time offender, and was incarcerated in a federal correctional institution. As a practitioner and then academic, I spent a number of years both working and studying in a variety of criminal justice arenas. In fact, as a practitioner, I was one of "those" punitive, get-tough justice system employees. Despite my knowledge of the various processes and procedures, I was devastated and completely unprepared for what I experienced. I have spent much of the last few years critiquing my earlier beliefs, trying to place those ideals in the present, to make sense of them through the lens of new experiences.

This manuscript utilizes notes and journal entries maintained by me (Olson) and looks inside the hidden and convoluted world of government sanctioned punishment through the eyes of a woman who lived through it, and all those women who will continue to live it. It focuses on the treatment of individuals in prison as a reflection of society. As such, one

might suggest society tolerates and accepts the violence that takes place, the dismal medical and psychological care, the blatant abuse by staff and guards, and the entirety of the efforts to break spirits and tear down the individual (Terry, 2000). The very fact that convicts become accustomed to and even expect such practices and daily routines further reinforces the emotional and physical damage that occurs with even limited incarceration. To be sure, the damages of imprisonment go far beyond the physical; the lasting impact on their psyches and identities is devastating.

Why Did I Expect Anything Different?

The unprecedented rise in incarceration over the past quarter of a century, as well as a shift in the overall demographic makeup of the United States prison population, has given rise to an exceedingly malevolent prison culture. Tough-on-crime policies and inflexible sentencing laws have expanded the prison population at unaffordable and unmanageable rates. Additionally, the War on Drugs has not only increased the size of our prison population, but also heavily skewed the population's mix toward society's marginalized individuals and people of colour. Spurred by policy and political change, a popular mentality has developed that celebrates the notion that prisoners deserve virulent and monstrous treatment as punishment. Embedded in this view is the inherent belief that convicts "get" what they "deserve". For individuals in prison, it means a menagerie of intolerable, inhumane and unacceptable conditions.

Against this backdrop, massive prison expansion has occurred, entailing the construction of bigger facilities, in remote locations, with few amenities and even fewer services. Prison policy has moved away from the basic principles that correctional services must be effective, accountable, and humane. The prison complex has become an ominous presence in our society to an extent unmatched in our history. Thus, most people seem to be genuinely perplexed about the current state of crime and punishment in America, confused in large part due to the myths, misconceptions, and half-truths that dominate public discussion (Currie, 1998). Meanwhile, the truths are often hidden or buried, or simply ignored as the complaints of coddled criminals sorry and remorseful only because they got caught.

Despite the huge expenditure of state and federal dollars on the construction of high-tech facilities, America's jails and prisons remain

neglected and vicious institutions (Sheldon, 2001). Of the more than 2.2 million people confined in our jails and prisons, many become familiar with unnecessary and degrading strip searches, food that is sometimes rotten or marginal in nutritional value, and the denial of medical care, medications, and mental health treatment. Further, consider women sent hundreds of miles away from children, family, and friends. Not only do these women endure a certain amount of emotional isolation indicative of the prison reality, but many also experience further alienation from the very things that are known to promote and encourage a more positive and crime-free lifestyle upon release. The following statements were made by women currently serving fairly lengthy sentences at FCI Tallahassee while their families remain hundreds of miles away:

> … my travel plans to get back to Texas are fucked up for another year or so because of my out-of-bounds shot [disciplinary write-up] – it was a bullshit charge! A fucking week in the hole … the chicken shit rules change all the fucking time - especially at quarterlies (rotation of guards into different units). The BOP has changed up their security point system making it harder to transfer. We both know that the longer I wait, the greater the chance I'll end up in trouble, thus starting this crappy process all over again (Personal correspondence, 2007).

> The visit from my husband was wonderful and I managed to survive the strip search - how positively humiliating. He visited for three days. He is having a very hard time and working to find out more about the 'second chance' bill that is before the senate. It appears that I would be a perfect candidate for it (meeting all the qualifications for participation). I'd love to be closer to home. It's crazy that there is a camp near [prisoner's home town], and I'm a first time offender (non-violent too) - it just doesn't make any sense. I know I'm one of the lucky ones, so few have family that can actually afford to travel (Personal correspondence, 2008).

> … I got to call the woman who has my daughter. I had not spoken to her in four years. I hate being so far away from her and my momma. Guess what? She spoke to me … my daughter spoke to

> me. I have only seen her four times since I gave birth to her in prison when I first got locked up…. Can you believe it? She talked to me (From a discussion with a young woman who, at one time, had been my bunk-mate, 2007).

Prisons are a central component in America's criminal justice system. Although America has always relied heavily on incarceration as a sanction for criminal behavior, an examination of the nation's history reveals substantial variation in public attitudes toward the criminal offender. Most recently, prisons exemplify a sanction of punishment for its own end, with no regard for potential rehabilitation. As incarceration rates have increased, living conditions in prisons and jails have deteriorated (Johnson, 2002). The availability of rehabilitation programs has decreased as the system struggles simply to accommodate the increased number of prisoners. Increasingly, legislators publicize their attempts to intensify the pains of imprisonment by reducing "inmate amenities" such as grants for college education, television privileges, computers in cells, and exercise through weight lifting (Ross and Richards, 2003; Hass and Alpert, 1995).* As the next passage indicates, the majority of the women in prison are well aware of the disconnect that exists between the system's illusion of "correcting" offenders and the reality of opportunities and survival upon release. One woman, a current FCI Tallahassee prisoner, remarked:

> … the jobs and programs seem worthless. I'm not sure how they expect this to prepare these women for re-entry to the general work force, I might agree if we were traveling back in time with plans to re-enter somewhere around the 1930s. The only things that are accomplished with the current model is that the FBOP gets cheap labor (Personal correspondence, 2008).

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* Editor's Note: The effects of the rapid expansion of the U.S. prison industrial complex have been thoroughly explored in the JPP. See, for example, Victor Hassine (1995), "Runaway Prison or Mr. Smith Goes to Harrisburg"; Jon Marc Taylor (1997), "Pell Grants for Prisoners Part Deux: It's Déjà Vu All Over Again" in Bob Gaucher (editor) (2002), *Writing As Resistance: The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons Anthology (1988-2002)*.

Upon release, many female prisoners have no one to depend on but themselves. They must find a job that will provide an income, as well as something that will afford them a modicum of emotional and psychological support. Without this, the released convict faces a life dependence on welfare or engaging in illegal activity to fulfill her needs, as well as the needs of her children. Effective programs geared towards the training of offenders are crucial if offenders are to succeed post-prison.

Acceptable Casualties

My experience of incarceration supports the research that most women are sentenced for non-violent crimes such as fraud or drug-related offenses (see BJS Fact Sheet, 2006; Belknap, 2001; Owen, 1998). However, any attempt to characterize female offenders must include disclaimers, as no single description can capture the variety of etiologies, traits, susceptibilities, or sheer randomness of influences that impel people to violate the law. My experience would suggest that the typical female offender is non-white, poor, a single parent, repeatedly victimized by society. She is expected to work to support herself and her children and to be a good parent; when she finds these expectations impossible to fulfill, and resorts to crime, she is punished. Yet, no assistance is forthcoming to help meet the expectations of medical and family care, or society. She is caught in an unwinnable situation.

Barbara Owen suggests that the dramatic rise in the women's prison population is the result of shifts in the criminal justice system's response to female offending. A significant proportion of the female incarcerated population is related to a shortsighted legislative response to punish drug users and minor property offenses. Instead of a policy of last resort, imprisonment has become the first order response for a wide range of women offenders who have disproportionately been swept up in the War on Drugs (Owen, 1998). A "zero tolerance" response such as this overlooks the fiscal or social costs of imprisonment, and further, it ignores the opportunities to prevent female offending because it cuts crucial social services and educational programs, and creates other barriers to economic success. Instead, this money is being used to fund and perpetuate the ever-increasing correctional budgets.

Make no mistake, a significant number of these prisoners may belong behind the

wire, but there remains a debate regarding how society has and should respond to the distinct needs of vastly different individuals. On the one hand, it is easy to criticize the federal government for warehousing and perpetuating the cycle of violence and despair, but at the same time, some of the women are predatory and dangerous and should not be

wandering freely in society. Further, I would argue that the War on Drugs is a war on women. Female arrestees test positive for drug use at a higher rate than males do, and increased drug use amongst women translates into more crimes such as possession, sales, and petty theft (see Mann, 1995; Merlo, 1995; Singer, 1995, as cited in Owen, 1998). Incarcerating people who use illegal drugs and isolating them from society is the cornerstone of drug war policy. Today in the United States 500,000 people wake up each day in prison for the use of some illegal drug - often not even use, for mere association with someone who uses an illegal drug can bring imprisonment for 20 years or life (*The Committee on Unjust Sentencing*, 2001). If you define success as reduction in the rate of illegal drug use over the period that the War on Drugs has been in operation, one can say that it has not brought about even marginal success. The following are statements from three women I met while in prison. They represent some of the "acceptable casualties" this country's war on crime and drugs has amassed:

> … I've been in prison for approximately five years now. I am 69 years old. Since I've been here, I went to work at UNICOR [phone/call centre where many prisoners work] where I make approximately 46 cents an hour. My arm is in a sling because of mobility problems, I spend my days in a wheelchair. They say I have six more years to serve.
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> The sentencing guidelines had just come into effect when I was arrested on a conspiracy charge, and though I was a first time non-violent drug offender, I received a 21 year sentence because I took my case to trial. I not only lost my freedom that day, I also lost my family, my home, and everything I owned. I am now 45 years old and have served over 15 years.
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> [Prisoner's name] suffers from depression and schizophrenia. She had been violently raped as a teenager, dropped out of high school,

> and spent time living on the streets. She was a prostitute with a severe drug and alcohol addiction who clumsily robbed banks to support her addictions, her disabled schizophrenic mother, her two children (from two different unsupportive fathers), her drug-addicted younger brother, and the pimp who beat her on a regular basis (Olson, 2004).

Violence and chaos were all around us, and dealing with the internal strife and constant conflict was exhausting. There was never any resolution of conflict by the staff, correctional officers, or administration. Each day, sometimes twice a day, they would line up outside the dining hall for some symbolic display of concern and support. The symbolic display was insulting and it made us feel even more transparent; blame was shuffled from employee to employee, questions were never answered, and when they were, it generally meant seeing yet another person (or three), still with no resolution. "Symbolic" because the inaction reinforced the insignificance and worthlessness of the convicts. Instead, most of the women focused on the things that really mattered - staying connected with the outside world and those we loved. Here, a number of the current female prisoners express the frustration that develops:

> This place in general, does not care about who you are or what you're capable of. They care about hiding you away so that most of society is comforted that a 'criminal' is not 'at large' (Olson, 2005).

> I've wondered many times why it appears that degradation is part of the treatment. If you wish these women to become 'improved' by this process, then you must treat them with some level of respect, even if they don't deserve it. I have never known of any living thing that responded well to humiliation and intimidation. Why would the prison expect women to leave here better than when they arrived. Oh, they might get their GED and they might have developed some new skills through the call center (UNICOR), but if they have no pride in themselves and feel as if their mistakes were a badge everyone could see, then you've doomed them to a

> life they never deserved, regardless of the bad choices they made before they got here (Personal correspondence, 2008).
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> … the shakedown shack? Hell, that ain't worth no fuckin' visit from no one … lookin' in my ass and making me take my tampon in and out … that's bullshit, you know they in there doin' that for kicks; because they can (From a discussion with a group of women with whom I worked in the education centre, 2005).
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> … for me it is a struggle to remember who I am … and to not allow myself to be degraded just because I made a mistake. Everyone does. That is not who I am or who we are. I don't want to become the person the criminal justice system says I am (Personal correspondence, 2007).
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> … we've had the usual excitement around here lately…. Another cop [slang term for guard] may be a daddy! Out of all the men it's the one that looks like predator! GAG! Last night someone in A-dorm tried to kill herself with heart pills. It's a wonder more don't give it a go…. For some reason I think the men probably try and succeed more often than us (Personal correspondence, 2007).
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> Some poor white girl tried to kill herself the other day by jumping from the roof of the chapel - she lived, but they say she's pretty fucked up (Personal correspondence, 2007).

Doing Time

Most prisoners will tell you that you do your time, or the time will do you. Some prisoners do easier time than others because they are able to engross themselves in the culture that exists within prison. For them, prison becomes their life. They immerse themselves in the lives of those around them. I was actually surprised at the latitude we had in terms of our free time; some would stay in their bunks and read, others would steal away to the iron pile for intimate relations, still others simply sat outside talking with others or reading by themselves. It bothered me the first time I noticed women laughing and seemingly enjoying their time together. I wondered

how it was possible to have fun in such a miserable place. It was offensive that the women could smile and socialize, waving at each other across the compound as if at a mall or a park in the city. I did not understand how these women could be happy here. Then one day, while walking back from the education centre where I worked, I heard my name called from across the compound. There stood several of my friends, talking loudly and motioning for me to come join them. At that moment, I realized I had become like those women I had despised earlier. What I found was that it was not about forgetting where we were, or about mocking the system that had put us here, but it was about feeling human and wanted and valued. It was about finding safety and security in a world where those things are carefully manufactured and easily destroyed.

> … how the fuck are you dude? Are you ok? I heard that fucking [prisoner] went off and tore up the fucking classroom... with the police cracking down on all this riot shit, they are sending people to the hole first and asking questions later. We were worried about you [reaching out to hug me] (a conversation that took place with friends as I returned to the unit one day after work).

> The new warden is making some huge changes. The facility has gone 24 x 7 controlled movements, which means no more evenings where you can spend them outside or at the track. It means basically being locked down 24 hours a day. You know all this is going to do is bring the chaos and violence from outside into the units … what do they suppose that is going to do to us? I guess they really don't care, huh? (Personal correspondence, 2008).

Nights were the hardest for me for a variety of reasons. At first it was more about too much idle time to think, but then it became more about the inability to ever really escape the noise and the constant pandemonium. Depending on the guard that night, the evening could go a variety of ways. The more dictatorial and unflinching guards demanded silence and immediate compliance. I preferred these nights because it meant that there was a chance of sleeping free of all night socializing, smoking in the bathrooms, women engaging in sexual escapades too unusual to describe, or any other situation that arises when 240 women are crammed together in small quarters with no supervision and no accountability.

The Relationships

Researchers do not seem to agree on the nature and extent of same-sex relationships in women's prisons. In the research that does exist, estimates vary based on varying institutional factors such as distance from relatives, average length of time served, and the policies designed to keep prisoners separated (as cited in Clear, Cole, and Reisig, 2006). It makes sense, especially to the people who have experienced the prison isolation, that linkages with other prisoners, whether physical or emotional, can mitigate the carceral experience.

Understand that by all FBOP guidelines, there is no such thing as "consensual sex" within any facility. All sexual activity is therefore considered sexual assault. While acknowledging the fact that the majority of the women did not take part in the oftentimes juvenile and grade school-like "coupling", the sexually charged nature of the facility cannot be ignored. Much of the arguing and many of the fights that took place were in response to transgressions in a relationship. The nature of the "interactions" ranged from sincere and "loving" (mock marriage ceremonies were not uncommon) to childish and self-indulgent. Public displays of affection were grounds for placement in the Special Housing Unit (SHU); however, a certain amount of physical interaction was tolerated and often times blatantly ignored.

As I observed it, the relationships tended to fall into roughly four categories. I am certain there could be more, and I am sure that there is significant overlap and drift from one group to another. I do not pretend to know why the women behave as they do, falling into one relationship or another, nor do I presume to know how these relationships evolve or the dynamics that keep them going. The "associations" are not defined merely in sexual terms, or by sexual acts alone, because I witnessed a variety of relationships that had nothing to do with physical intimacy. Many of the Latino and Hispanic women, for example, developed exceptionally close "families" that included sisters, daughters, cousins, and even "nephews and sons". Some women assumed surprisingly masculine positions, including the adoption of male dress (even though we all wore the same uniform), hairstyle, jobs and duties, and other specifically masculine roles. This masculine "function" played a part in both the intimate relationships, as well as the more domestic, functional family unit. It is worth noting that race was not a social organizing factor; personal and sexual relationships among the women were often interracial and interethnic.

There is a predominantly "heterosexual" group. These women are typically married or have boyfriends at the time of their incarceration. They may be approached by other women in the facility, but they remain faithful to the ascribed male-female relationships. In my view, this appeared to be the majority of the women. A large lesbian group existed as well. These women were lesbians on the outside, maintained "healthy", monogamous relationships with partners on the outside, and most will continue them upon their release. These women may at times become involved in a relationship while incarcerated, but being locked up has not directly impacted their sexuality. There were a number of women in heterosexual relationships on the outside who, for a variety of reasons, became involved with another woman while incarcerated. This makes up the third group. I met a number of women who were married to men, or who at one time had "boyfriends" on the outside, but for reasons such as companionship, intimacy, or fear of alienation/loneliness during long term sentences, became involved with other incarcerated females. The convicts referred to this as "gay for the stay". The "bull-daggers" (or "bull-dagging") make up the final grouping of women. These relationships were characterized by multiple partners, included the swapping of partners, and sometimes forced/coerced sexual activity/favours. Typically one women was very dominating, the other(s) would work, cook, clean, fight, and perform sexual favours for the one in charge.

Medical Care

Prison facilities for women typically lack proper medical services; yet, women usually have more serious health problems than men. It could be argued that the failure to provide women prisoners with the most basic preventative medicine and procedures, ranging from immunizations, breast cancer screening, and management of chronic diseases, is resulting in more serious health problems that are exponentially more expensive to treat (Clear, et al., 2006). It is unfortunate that most in society do not realize poor medical care for those who are incarcerated simply puts off and shifts costs to an already overburdened community health care system once the prisoner is released.

Access to medical care in prison was extremely difficult for many women as the staff were often unavailable, and when appointments were

made (and kept), the staff often minimized prisoners' concerns, and in some cases, blatantly ignored them. It makes sense that incarcerated women may have more serious health problems than women generally. This may be because of the increased likelihood of living in poverty, limited access to preventative medical care, poor nutrition, chemical dependency, or perhaps limited education on matters related to health. Brown and Macallair (2005) suggest that the majority of incarcerated women have never had access to health care. These women have never been employed in a job that provides for any sort of medical or psychological assistance, or because of homelessness, constantly moving from one place to another, and lack of resource awareness, they were never in a position where these crucial needs could be addressed. One of the main problems in women's prisons has to do with the lack of skilled and available medical care (as cited in Belknap, 2001). At FCI Tallahassee, we had one medical "worker" rumored to be a "caretaker of animals" from another country. This is highly likely, and I can tell you without a doubt (as I was there), that not only did he tell a woman her "uterus would grow back", he told another women she was "lactating because of a sinus infection". Surprisingly, these two "diagnoses" were not the most ignorant or ridiculous statements this man ever made.

The shortage of medical care for women is further exacerbated when one acknowledges the greater medical needs of women. The American Correctional Association (1990) reported that one in five U.S. prisons lack the gynecological/obstetrical services that most women require. While I attempted to go to "sick call" twice during my stay, both times I waited in excess of seven hours only to be turned away with a dismissing instruction to "go buy antihistamines at the commissary" - a solution, by the way, that had absolutely nothing to do with my physical malady.

Life on the Compound

The activity on the compound was as varied as the women who filled its walls. I met women from all walks of life, and somehow we all had to learn to adapt to our new environment. It is a world like no other, and each day (and night) brought something new. Prison reality is indeed harsh and unrelenting, with a hidden culture of norms, values, and social roles not seen on the outside; a milieu that seemed to force us to think only of surviving day to day. "Hope" seemed to be discouraged, although subtle glimpses of

what could be permeated the walls and the visions of a life not lived. For many, this was their life, and to have hope or to dream of a better life would just make time that much more painful. I would only be there for a short while, but the weight of my future felt oppressive and heavy, and I was certain that if I could not shut off that part of my thinking, I would surely be crushed to death. I had to survive now, and that meant I had to learn to reconcile myself not only to prison life and the immediacy of the violence and the bedlam, but also to the mundane and the monotonous.

> … if I stare hard enough through the fence and the razor wire, it seems to disappear. What I wouldn't give to be somewhere else… Tonight, like so many, my thoughts were interrupted by yelling, streams of profanity, the frenzied sounds of gravel under steel-toed shoes, and the unmistaken sound of bodies coming together violently, with force, and with anger. The perimeter guard shouts to the women, pointing his rifle. The blaring compound speaker comes on and admonishes all of us back to our units. Another day ends just as chaotically as it started. There is predictability in the miserableness (Olson, 2005).

> Sitting with P. on the patio, I can almost forget where I am. I awoke to the usual fighting and screaming - God I hate the ghetto hollering. I made my bunk, fixed my coffee, and wandered outside knowing she would be there. The anxiety dissipates with a friendly wave and a comforting smile. Today, like many, we discuss failure. She has been here six years, and I think how lucky she must be - she doesn't seem to fear failure, but rather seems to embrace it (Olson, 2005).

The highlight of my day was the time spent on "the patio" (the cement stoops that line the compound) with friends. It is here that I found some of my most intense connections to others. This happened as we sometimes sat in comfortable silence, but also as we shared with each other our journeys through life. We discussed, almost dissected, our lives prior to prison. We recounted stories of pain and unimaginable sorrow and loss, our lessons of love, of resourcefulness and forgiveness, the necessity of laughter, our courage to take risks, and our willingness to fight for those things we believed in most. Somehow this emotional cleansing, to women so very different from me (or anyone I knew), had a way of healing old wounds.

> I was out on the track today, in my own world as usual, when L. came running up behind me and mockingly jumped on my back. We laughed and hugged, and recounted stories of the day. We listened to music on our portable radios, made fun of each other's dancing abilities, and shared stories about loved ones in our lives. How is it in a world so far away I find companionship and emotional freedom like nothing I've ever experienced? Is it because all the superficial bullshit means nothing here? Is it because degradation and humiliation have stripped away our exterior? Is it because we share an experience that has so profoundly changed us? (Olson, 2005).

Beyond the Punishment

> When I first got here I didn't care about anything. I let myself go. I cried all the time. I kept to myself. It was lonely and it made the days long and the nights even longer. A couple of years into my sentence I decided that it wouldn't beat me. The system took my freedom, the state took my kids, and I was here for life. But they can't take what's here [pointing to her chest and her head] unless you let them. The bastards don't get my soul. I get up every morning, fix my hair and do my make-up. I get pedicures on the weekends, and I help others with their hair and their fashion … it makes me feel useful, like I have meaning. I've made friends here; I have a girlfriend who cares about me. This is my life now, it's no longer painful, I've accepted it and I've adjusted. I gave up hope a long time ago (a 27 year old FCI prisoner, nine years into a life sentence for a non-violent drug offense).

Even now, almost three years after my incarceration, I find myself consumed with the lives of the women I left behind. I am relieved and blessed at where life has taken me, but I feel a deep sense of loss and guilt for those who remain caged, tucked neatly out of public sight. How strange it must sound to outsiders. We are, after all, merely criminals, without feelings, lesser in spirit and lacking in heart. I get phone calls periodically from some of the women in Tallahassee. On a good day, with no dropped or interrupted calls, the allotted 15 minutes seem to fly, and strangely, it is

as if I have been transported back in time. Very few people will understand how or why I look forward to these calls. Not only is it a chance to make sure the prisoner with whom I am talking is physically safe, but on a very personal level, it allows me a brief moment in time when it is OK to be an ex-con. I have amazing friends and family who have been nothing but loving and supportive, but for those all too rare 15 minutes, my walls can come completely down, and that place in my soul that I work so hard to hide opens up - it is both painful and liberating. For that brief period in time, I am completely exposed, and yet I feel more at ease in those moments than most others in my day. I cannot explain it, nor do I really want to try. It just is, and I long for those times more than I particularly care to admit.

Conclusion

By close of the post-modern era, there were nearly two million individuals serving time in prisons and jails. Despite the "crime drop" of the 1990s, prisons continued to be built and prison populations continued to rise. Yet the most ignored fact of this increase was that, while most Americans believed that hardened criminals were the ones being sent to prison, the reality is that most of the added prisoners were placed there for misdemeanors, and a large portion of those were for minor drug offenses (Oliver and Hilgenberg, 2006).

Society seems to truly misunderstand what it means to "do time". Prisons, for both men and women, are seen as obscure and distant places of punishment and deterrence; where pain and suffering are allowed and at times even encouraged. While the connection between the motivations for crime and the deterrent effect of imprisonment is unclear at best, the general community continues to believe that prisons should have some effect on the crime rate. Throughout the nation, this has not proven to be the case. As prison populations continue to increase, there seems to be little appreciable difference in crime rates (Austin and Irwin, 2001). As many scholars suggest, the failure of prison policy to reduce crime is based on an incorrect belief in the power of deterrence, something I have experienced and witnessed personally as I was marshaled through the criminal justice system, and from the women I met along the way.

Common thought has it that the prison system is not so bad, and that prison time is easy or inconsequential (Johnson, 2002). Prisons today

may be less cruel than when they were first introduced, but that does not mean that incarceration is an experience without pain. In place of physical suffering, the modern prison inflicts a far more severe damage that is spiritual and social in nature. The loss of freedom is indeed fundamental, as is the loss of social status and the lifetime of labeling that comes with being a convict. Chuck Terry, also a former convict, proffers that in addition to the physical adjustment to isolation in an overcrowded and often violent world, there is a psychological adjustment that must be made as well. The problem is not simply being locked up with hundreds of strangers, but also with the difficulty in having one's self-esteem and identity bombarded with the evidence of a failed life and a lesser human status. Few see prison as a complex social and psychological world laden with challenges so profound that one's very own identity is at stake (Terry, 2000). There is a self-loathing that develops amongst convicts (myself included), a personal feeling of diminished self-worth perpetuated by a system more concerned with effectiveness and efficiency than with human life.

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