

**T**hirty years ago, in simpler times, I was sent to the penitentiary. They gave me a haircut, stitched a number above my breast pocket, and tossed me in a cell on the fish range. My biggest worry, besides my sentence, was whether I would ever get the right-sized boots.

It is the year 2000, and I am back in prison. No haircut, I have to memorize my number, and my biggest worry is whether I will get the right criminogenic index rating.

The fish range is now called an Assessment Centre. They have painted murals on the concrete and renamed guards correctional officers. Prisoners have become inmates or even residents, we wear street clothes instead of blues, and there are more behaviour modification programs in here than bars.

The key to understanding the new paradigm in our prisons may lie in the corporate logo: the CSC, Correctional Service of Canada—it works both forward and backward, in both official languages. My eleven-year-old, on her first visit, saw the word “Corrections” on the ubiquitous signage, and said, “I think it should be ‘Mistakes,’ Dad.”

My Regional Reception Assessment Centre Handbook informs me I will be here for ten to fourteen weeks, during which time I will be evaluated, assessed, analyzed, tested, probed, and profiled. A team of IPOs, CO2s, psychologists and unit managers will collect, collate, graph, and interpret the data. They will determine risk factors, crime cycles, pen placement, treatment programs and how much fibre I will need in my diet. It could be argued, and convincingly, that this is the evolution of penology.

Three decades ago this system was called the Canadian Penitentiary Service, and it was not forward-looking, or working in anyone’s language, so a handful of determined federal bureaucrats began to study some of the European models. They adapted them so well that Canada has become a world leader in penology. Other countries now come here to study us, even, belatedly, some Americans. The United States has gone through a twenty-five-year “devolution” and its prisons are experiencing an unprecedented level of inhumanity and brutality. The Clockwork Grey of the new CSC seems a small price to pay to preserve our country’s humanity. That said, this is an evolution with an absurd edge.

Designing programs and implementing them are the two solitudes of CSC. To order someone into therapy is often to subvert the purpose.

Willingness is the key to change—you have to want it to get it. So there exists a jumping-through-hoops mentality by prisoners, and an air of resignation on the part of the staff. But in fairness, the percentage of prisoners who genuinely wish to change, and the caliber of instructors willing to help them, is much higher than the skeptics would have us believe.

My Regional Reception Assessment Centre Handbook is a humourless text, but as I read the earnest descriptions of available programs I cannot help but wonder. The Violent Offender Program? Would Billy the Kid have emerged nine months later as Billy the Inner Child? Anger management? Could Vinnie (Mad Dog) Coll have become Vinnie (Assertive Dog) Coll? Would Bonnie and Clyde, made to enroll in Skills for a Healthy Relationship, have come to terms with their co-dependency and been granted a conjugal visit? Pushed into taking Cognitive Skills, Machine-Gun Kelly would soon identify his trigger thoughts. Ma Barker, in her seventh week of Family Violence Circle, might have reached the stunning conclusion she had been a life-long enabler.

I am ahead of myself. Before anyone reaches their inner child or enabling self, they have to take tests. Lots of tests. It is tests that drive the modern personal correctional plan.

My favourite so far has been the 560-odd questionnaire called the Minnesota Multi-Phasic Personality Index. Never mind that it has been proved culturally biased and hopelessly flawed, the centerfold of my “critical needs assessment” will be determined by such questions as, “Have you ever wanted to be a girl?” Think of the possibilities. Had the question been, “Have you ever wanted to be a woman?” I might have answered differently. But a girl? Did they mean a child, or a “grrrl,” or is “girl” what they still call a woman in Minnesota? Think, think. If I were a “grrrl” I could have a conjugal visit with myself. No, better play it safe and mark False.

Next question, “Do you love your mother? Or if she’s dead, did you?” You do not stop loving someone just because they are dead, but my mother is alive and I love her very much so I mark True.

“Do you believe you are being controlled by an unseen force?” Does this mean subliminal advertising and the all-pervasive consumer culture? I glance at the woman administering the test—she is staring back with the look of someone who thinks more along the lines of “Did Satan order you to rob that bank?” I circle False.

I am most intrigued with, “If you were a reporter, would you like to report on the theatre?” At first, this seems McCarthyesque, as in, “Would

you like to keep an eye on those socialist homosexual so-called actors?" Of course it could also mean if you were a reporter would you not prefer to report on child poverty or political corruption? In other words, something substantial. But, I like the theatre! Besides, if it is good theatre it deals with child poverty and political corruption. Stop thinking, just answer the question. Okay, True. I will be a pansy art critic. At least I did not say I wanted to be a girl, even if I did.

"Would you like to be a florist?" No, no, no. Read my lips. Give me some questions on hockey here, or how about them Blue Jays, eh? I handed in my test, unfinished. I figured if I did not have a personality they would assign me one.

Next came the real pick of the litter, the Psychopathy Checklist Revised. It determines, unequivocally, whether you are a psychopath or not. I remember John Gray, our John Gray, the playwright, not the Venus and Mars guy, interviewing the author of this test. John used the doctor's own statistics to extrapolate the fact that there had to be, at minimum, 40,000 psychopaths living in British Columbia. With a couple of hundred locked away in prisons, that still left 39,800-odd psychos at large. The good doctor reassured John these were people who put their psychopathy to good use. They lived productive, well-adjusted lives as surgeons, CEOs and ambulance drivers.

The light bulb went on. The CSC does not have to go through all these gyrations to reprogram anyone, they just have to find every prisoner the right job!

Psychos become CEOs. Bookmakers could work for the 6/49 Lotto Corp. The government weenies currently running SportsAction are rank amateurs compared with real bookmakers. The action would double in three months.

Small-time drug dealers could be issued white smocks and put behind the pharmacy counter. Dispensing fees are ten times the mark-up on an eightball of cocaine. A B&E artist would slip like a crowbar into the home security business. In custom-protecting your home he could charge you more for alarm systems than what he could steal from your house, anyway.

The weight pit crews, all pumped up and tattooed down, could be recruited for *World Wrestling Federation Raw*. They would take wrestling to new levels, and earn as much as \$10,000 a night, just for being themselves. Even those criminals too corrupt or too incorrigible to be anything else could

hang out a shingle and practice law. The worst that could happen is nobody would notice.

But the CSC is not an employment agency. Its self-determined mandate is to reconcile the twin pillars of punishment and rehabilitation, a difficult enough task without the public, political, and media scorn. It takes a certain brand of courage—some would call foolhardy, some would call moral—to continue to pursue a humanitarian vision of corrections, but to abandon course now would surely be a “Mistakes.”

In simpler times, on that fish range thirty years ago, I was celled with a young man, one of the last to get the paddle. One of his memories, besides the scars on his skin, was of being bound at the ankles and wrists and having a hood pulled over his head. He was the last of a dozen men that day, and he remembers the hood, the inside, being slick with the mucous and spittle and blood from the broken lips of those who went before him.

I have spent years in U.S. prisons, and more years here inside. I have observed the public mood in this country. I know the CSC vision is all that stands between me and a black hood filled with the blood and the fear of my fellow prisoners.

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