

CORRECTIONS IS A MALE ENTERPRISE

Jo Anne Mayhew

The initial motivation for this article occurred on Prison Justice Day, August 10th, 1987. I had given it an ironic title taken from the Carson Commission Report, *Corrections Is A Human Enterprise*. I am no longer satisfied with the title or much that I wrote. I still live confined within the fortress structure of the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. It remains a limestone monument to social failure. The structure effectively incarcerates women from across the entire country. The concrete walls, cement cells, and barred windows represent a rigidity of social thinking, perpetuated, obstinate blindness to suffering in the interest of serving the economic needs of the Kingston community. I have been told that Kingston ranks as one of the prettiest cities in Canada. To my mind it is a city whose vitality has been fed by the blood and pain of prisoners.

George Jackson in *Soledad Brothers* (1970) says that words written by prisoners for readers on the outside must proceed obliquely; otherwise, those writing them need only to take words covered in blood, spit, and sperm and fling them on paper. These are the dangerous words, the ones padlocked inside. So are the stories of the women contained behind the walls of this prison.

I have told the story slantways. I am editor of the prison magazine because I am a well socialized, middle-class white woman, conditioned and educated to master the placating word. I am also mistress of an idealistic love for one

dead man, two living children, the Atlantic Ocean and a country called Canada. It is not a grandiose social view but it is my own and the anger I feel at having this view of living torn from me is intense.

I grew up in southern Ontario when the city of Cambridge was still called Galt. I walked through the piles of leaves on Main Street to Central School with the lines of a memorized poem playing in my head — “Where we go to school each day, Indian children used to play.” I knew Indians were people of the past. I had collected the artifacts of their lives in the summer fields. Almost forty years later I have found the daughters of these forgotten, wished away Indian people within the walls of this prison. Mostly they have been transported from the Prairie provinces but I have also met Cree Native from northern Ontario as well as *une femme du Montagnaise* from Sept-Isles. Not only do these women suffer the normal pain and hardship of imprisonment far, far from their homes, they must also endure the upheaval and chaos of adjusting to alien white culture, both its standards and language nuances. Their own culture is far from dead within them; many have been taught in traditional ways. They share these with us. I have attended Pow Wow with them, a celebration of living. They have taught me to bead and stitch moccasins. I have heard their elders speak and have smelled the smoke of burning sweet grass. These women do not relate well to the words of our psychologists nor do they respond well to mind altering drugs. As the pressures of a long period of incarceration mount, they seek relief by slashing their own bodies. They cut their arms and they cut their throats. The walls and floors are covered in their blood. The psychiatrist told me such blood letting was a euphoric relief. I told him it was sick, an abnormal response to abnormal pain. Prison does not sustain the middle-class values of my southern Ontario childhood. It has altered my narrow idealistic view of Canadian society.

I was transported from Nova Scotia to the Prison for Women in October, 1985. I had been convicted of second degree murder following the shooting death of my hus-

band in May of the same year. It was a drunken tragic end to over twenty years of partnership. I was sentenced to life in prison. I had been held in a forensic unit in a mental hospital for months before my trial. After the conviction, I was taken to the Halifax County Correctional Centre and placed in a cell to await transportation east. There are no facilities in the Maritime for women serving Federal sentences. After several weeks in the cells and one final visit with my two daughters, I was driven several hundred miles to Dorchester prison en route to Kingston. I had never been arrested before and the prospect of what lay ahead was terrifying. I arrived at Dorchester only to be informed that there had been an error in my paperwork. I was not scheduled to depart until the following week. I was returned to the cells at Halifax. Some days later I was awakened at about 4:30 a.m., driven again to Dorchester, placed in shackles, a body belt and handcuffs, for the flight to Kingston.

Unlike my Native Sisters, I had a personal case history that included the services of several psychiatrists. I believe my sanity was fragmented and that only forty years of "respectable" behaviour gave me the ability to achieve an acceptable standard of stability. Within myself I was being torn apart by the loss of my best friend, knowing I was responsible for his death. I was in agony with concern and worry for two daughters left behind in the turmoil of unresolved grief and family affairs. I had not been allowed to attend my husband's funeral; I was allowed only a brief six minute phone call to my daughters. I was very confused and disoriented. The thin veneer of my behaviour cracked when I was moved from a Range to the Wing for "medical reasons" and I had to cope with new bath fixtures!

Shortly after this, it was suggested that I might benefit from a trip to the "treatment centre" across the street at Kingston Penitentiary. I agreed, wondering if some raging maniac was truly lodged within me. I spent the winter of 1986 at KP. The treatment unit was under re-construction and little activity was possible. I was given industrial ear baffles on my first day. These were a curious contrast to the type of verbal therapy I had anticipated. I strongly suspect

that only survivors of concentration camps have ever had to deal with personal tragedy in such bizarre surroundings. Jack-hammers pounded at old concrete walls as new ones were erected making the women's unit smaller and smaller. I felt I was living out some tortured Poe-like vision.

Once a day I was permitted to go out to a small twenty by fifty foot yard. It was surrounded by a tall Steelco fence...and another taller wire fence mounted with razor edged barbed wire... surrounded by the outer concrete wall of Kingston Penitentiary. Above, guards watched me from the guard towers. I walked through the snow and ice knowing where I was but finding disbelief equally plausible. This was the only refuge from insanity offered by the system to distressed women. It seemed more like a grim tale of Siberia than that of Chatelaine Canada.

I save only a few memories of those months in Kingston Penitentiary. One is of a daily, warm, friendly smile of encouragement from one of the male prisoners who served the breakfast line. I knew no man had come to this place by an easy route, yet this fellow traveler was strong enough to offer hope as well as food. Another memory is as harsh and bitter as the chill that leaked through the old windows of our unit. I had the company of a young woman. She too had been sentenced to life in prison and was rebelling against this circumstance. She had slashed her arms repeatedly and had finally turned to self-starvation in protest. The therapeutic response to her actions was to have the staff remove her clothes, issue summer weight pajamas, and place her under lights in an observation cell. She was held in this condition for ten days. On one occasion the nurse outside her cell remarked, "I wish I was wearing my fur coat."

I returned to the Prison for Women a little saner and a little wiser. To call a situation that resembles the setting for gothic horror a "treatment centre for women" is the construct of insensitive or sheer brutish planning.

Who is responsible or irresponsible? Nameless, faceless bureaucrats without the imagination to visualize their mothers, wives, or daughters condemned to these condi-

tions? Or are there more sinister overtones? Are convicted women treated with uncaring contempt for contravening the myths of true womanhood, found failing as women because of human error? The gross inequities facing women incarcerated by the Correctional System of Canada are too extreme to be explained by mere bureaucratic oversight.

Largely unknown to the public and virtually ignored by Government, the Prison for Women continues to exist in an outrageously expensive, mind boggling time warp of confusion. It is common to have new arrivals seriously wonder if they have been institutionalized in a mental hospital by mistake and equally common to hear statements such as "I feel like I am on a different planet" or "I feel like Alice after she fell down the rabbit's arse hole."

The confusion of prisoners is well matched by that of visiting officials. Somewhere along the path of historic non-development, a stereotypical compensation was offered to female offenders to fill vast discrepancies with a larger male system. By the questionable virtue of these compensations, women are allowed to wear civvies and purchase cosmetics. The result is a hundred perky-looking women awash in cheek blush and eye shadow, going nowhere. However, to the casual eye on the quick tour, we do look fine and immeasurably more presentable than our male counterparts in basic green.

Given our society's priorities on appearances, it is not too difficult to understand how hard it has been to get any senior administrators to look beneath these superficial trappings to the far deeper problems and confusions that lurk below. However these have become blatantly obvious to many of us inside, and I, along with other sisters, feel it is past time to break through the deplorable compounded confusion that has surrounded women imprisoned in this country.

Most of the confusion comes from the basic nature of the Correctional Services itself. Even now, as it is (once again) under review, Canada's correctional system is described as segmented, fractionalized, and criticized for lack of co-ordination and consistency. Yet the analysis

behind these observations is directed at only the larger body of institutions, all male. The Prison for Women is less than an aside to the entire reform. This is less amazing when it is recognized that this is not a new instance of neglect but merely a repeat of similar "oversights" throughout the years of so-called prison reform in this country.

The Prison for Women was opened in January 1934. It was constructed from a design used to build Kingston Penitentiary in the 1830's. This means that women of the 1980's are incarcerated in circumstances planned when rules of silence were in force and relief of monotony from long cell hours was being reduced by permitting the use of crayons and jigsaw puzzles. Today we prisoners dubiously benefit by attempting to fit these same turn-of-the-century, seven by ten foot cells with an extensive array of allowable personal effects. The result is the harshly archaic two-tiered A range filled with the conflicting needs of some attempting to up-grade their education without desks or bookshelves and others trying to relax in a bedlam of noise created by stereos and/or televisions. Likewise, the fire hazard of library and academic material as well as the quantity of clothing now allowed prisoners was never given serious consideration. We female prisoners are still locked in by the bolting action of a main wheel in addition to individual cell levers that need manual operation from the outside. Truthfully, the thought of fire in this prison is too terrifying to dwell on.

As early as 1938, the Archambault Commission reported on the appalling conditions at the Prison for Women and urged that it should be closed. This has been reiterated by commission after commission report. Indeed, these recommendations have been given serious consideration by many public officials as well as concerned citizens, but not one has been acted upon. Since my arrival in 1985, I have been told that more up-to-date programs and improvements have not been implemented because this prison is closing. This excuse has finally worn too thin. The emperor of the Correctional Service of Canada will have to find new clothes. Judging from the past, awaiting future develop-

ments at the Prison for Women will allow ample time to survey the non-productive results of prison reform.

New terminology does little to change the substance of prison living. A most recent example at this prison was a total re-classification of the prison population during the winter of 1988. Significant attention has been drawn to the fact that female prisoners were designated much higher security risk classifications than their male counterparts. In the past, probably almost half of the population was considered maximum. In response to this unwarranted discrepancy, new security labels were affixed and the majority of the population were re-classified as medium, with almost twenty-five per cent being considered minimum. However, not one living regulation has been modified to allow more prisoners responsibility and institutional freedom. The living reality has not been changed by an inch, but the new figures will look impressive on yet another, another and another sheet of paper. To administrators and to most of you outside reading this, that is what prisons and prisoners are about: facts, figures, numbers, surveys, statistics, and paper. A thousand times more care and attention is given to these details than is ever awarded the individual inside the system.

This article was returned to me for rewriting. There were crisp editorial notes pointing out that as I traced the historical patterns of the main body of the Correctional service, noting the easement of living for male prisoners provided by constructing more moderate living circumstances in the guise of new prisons, I appeared to be supportive of prison reform in that direction. I do not think that the building of more prisons is any step to reform. However, I doubt that most readers will find it credible that since the 1950s a system of Corrections was devised for this entire country without one ounce of planning put into effect for women. Yet that is the truth of the situation. This article is being written from the upper tier of A range, that portion of the Prison for Women that was declared unfit in 1938! As I have stated once before, I am serving a life sentence and the most progression I can look forward

to is a return to a Wing unit, an old army barrack located down three flights of stairs. No man is expected to serve a life sentence with such a total lack of expectations. There are no carrots or sticks for women, just larger, unremitting portions of boredom.

I do not suggest that a parallel system of Corrections be implemented for women. The establishment has rationalized inequality by justifying its position with economics. It is too expensive to provide the same services to women as are provided to men. Most have accepted this explanation and walked on. I do not. I do not believe that the mere handful of women involved in the "cystem" justifies the overwhelming abuse. What does explain the reluctance to face these abuses is the function of paternalistic capitalism at its worst.

The women inside these walls are very real, human, mainly conservative, and often depressingly dependent. Their problems are not bizarre or complicated. In the main, over eighty per cent are addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. Their crimes were committed while under the influence or while obtaining these substances. An equally high percentage are victims of incest, rape, and/or battering. The likelihood of these traumas contributing in part to addiction is very high. In the Fall of 1987, over fifty per cent were below grade nine literacy levels and it is the exceptional few who have marketable work skills beyond the lowest status of employment.

It is not hard nor too complicated to understand. These women need someone to believe in them until they can come to believe in themselves. Addiction is no longer a vague mystery. Much help can be found in both psychological and physiological treatment. Education can be upgraded and job training situations are within development potential, if (the saddest and most futile word in our language) the political will exists. *The needs of female prisoners are no different than the needs of many Canadian women.* The severity of the particular situation may vary, the lack of family or associate support may vary, but the basic needs are similar. These are not being met in most Canadian communi-

ties for the majority of women and it is most unlikely that the current Government (1988) will make any enlightened move on behalf of female offenders while continuing to remain unmoved by the voices of women still free in society.

Another unspoken truth about prisons in Canada is that they are Big Business. Nowhere is that more evident than in the city of Kingston. The economic welfare of many individuals employed by the Correctional Service as well as that of the merchants of the area is a direct result of employment by prisons. Thousands of marginally trained, relatively uneducated men and women receive high salaries for maintaining the human zoos in this region. To have one prison closed would pose a grave economic threat to the entire population. It is likely that provocative situations would be deliberately created to promote the image of "violent" prisoners and enhance the need for these fortress structures to restrain the violence of those within. A study by Doob and Roberts makes it clear that the Canadian public already perceive violence associated with offenders in this country at over seventy per cent of its real occurrence (Doob and Roberts 1983). It is far easier for those wearing uniforms of law and order to destroy the credibility of prisoners than for us within the confines of the "cystem" to be heard and our reality acknowledged.

The reality within the Prison for Women is that life is hard, sometimes brutal; living barely adequate and programming in all areas marginal. Yet, even these limited facilities are light years ahead of the almost non-existent facilities housing women left in the provincial prisons. Far less provision has been made for meeting their needs. They are frequently housed in a prison within a male institution and denied access to the ordinary facilities such as gym, library, chapel, or small work opportunities (e.g. kitchen or laundry). Their time is passed in tedious, unproductive minutes. As Jessica Mitford says in *Kind and Usual Punishment*, "The lives of women in prison are not the worst but they are lives of planned, unrelieved inactivity and boredom, a pervasive sense of helplessness and frustration engulfing not only the inmates but their keepers, them-

selves prisoners.”

Boredom, blood, tears, futility, that is what prison is all about. How uncanny that this description echoes words often spoken of life in the trenches of war. It seems that the same sort of approach to dealing with problems through violence is applied in both small and large situations. I do not believe our planet can survive another global war and I do not think my country can continue to solve its social problems through building more prisons.

My position is supported by others. I owe a debt of gratitude for the insight being provided by the Church Council on Justice and Corrections. In 1986 this organisation began presenting a new language as a basis for approaching not just reform but the transformation of the justice system. Originally called the language of reconciliation, it has continued to expand and incorporate the broad social thinking of many legal minds. In 1987, in a brief review of the Law reform Commission, the Council has suggested a model of accountability be established:

Accountability means confronting offenders with the harm they have done and providing them with the opportunity to repair the damages and reassure the community. This does not mean that accountability is soft on an offender. It might be harder for the burglar to hear of the long term trauma of the victims than to simply do time (Law Reform Commission Update 1987).

These individuals see that the wasteful process of scapegoating and punishment must stop. It will require a much deeper process of truth telling and calling to account on a personal level. To begin rebuilding, we must stop fooling ourselves about the true nature of human violence. If we can take one first step to implementing alternatives to Prison for women, approach re-integration with communities, and spend funds on community resource development rather than more prison construction, we will pave the way for a better social future. At this moment the Canadian Government is giving serious consideration to

building another prison for women in British Columbia (See *The Whig Standard*, Friday, December 18, 1987:2). I have been told this 1990 model still contains barred cells. These will stand as monuments to failure in the century ahead. These new cages will be filled with women, sisters and daughters of the future.

The women now behind the walls of the Prison for Women in Kingston have been called "too few to count". I disagree. Alterations will come about in the system. If the real needs of these few women are honestly addressed, we can be counted upon to make a significant contribution to the larger body of Corrections. I have long loved the potential vigour of this country. It is time to tap that vitality and move beyond patriarchal policies that have sustained these prisons and the limited vision they represent.

References

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