

I am guilty. There, I said it.

I know, you are surprised that someone behind Michigan's grey walls and razor wire will admit his guilt. I have been locked up for a dozen years now and I realize that I am wrong – so, so-o-o wrong about so many things. And now that I have realized this, admitting it is not so hard.

How do I know I am guilty? Easy – the state tells me. If I were not guilty, the charges would not have my name on them. I have received over twenty-five “major misconduct tickets” during my twelve years of penance, and each one of those tickets had my name on it. I am a thief, a violator, a disobeyer, and, most recently and somewhat distressingly, a terrorist. It is true. The state told me. I am guilty of stealing my own book. I do not exactly understand it myself, but I have learned to trust the state's judgment. After all, it would not waste the paper and hours to write, investigate, and hold court on the ticket if I was not guilty.

I have also discovered that I am a misuser of state property valued over ten dollars. Scratch that. I am an unauthorized communicator. The hearings officer, a state-paid lawyer with a keen insight into the nuances of Michigan's laws and human nature, agreed with me that tossing a dirt clump the size of a quarter at a window to get someone's attention was not quite misuse of state property. Imagine my relief! I was not a misuser!

I was not out of the woods yet, however, and the hearings officer was quick on the rebound. After all, my name was on the ticket, so I must be guilty of something. The officer who wrote the ticket knew it. I knew it. The hearings officer knew it. If I were not guilty of breaking some law, I would not be in the penitentiary. If I were not guilty of some violation, this major misconduct ticket would not say “James Blau #214995” across the top of it.

The hearings officer's brows knitted. He chewed his pen. He scratched his ample jowl. Then his face brightened. “Throwing dirt is not an authorized form of communication between prisoners!” he exclaimed. I was an unauthorized communicator! It is good to know what I am guilty of, even if I must face the punishments. Somehow it does not feel right to be guilty but not know of what one is guilty. There are so many rules in Michigan prisons, I am sure to be in violation of a half dozen at any given time. Two pages of rules for the chow hall, another two for the cellblocks, another two pages for the recreation building, and, wow, a small pamphlet crammed full of rules for

visiting rooms and telephones. I know that if I could afford a consultant, I would not be guilty all the time.

I guess I am guilty of misleading you, too, because I now remember that I am a misuser, although I think that I have rehabilitated myself since the charge several years ago. At a penitentiary in the northern peninsula of Michigan I spent several months in administrative segregation, which is a professional-sounding term for solitary confinement, which is a fancy term for the hole, which is aptly named. Fed in our cells, I kept a small Styrofoam cup so I did not have to suck the water out of the grimy spigot on the sink-toilet combination. When an officer found the offending cup, cleverly wedged under the radiator, he wrote a ticket for "Misuse of State Property." Of course I was guilty, but because the disposable cup was valued under ten dollars, it was considered a minor infraction. The cup, however, carried the significant status of being "food-related contraband," thus entitling me to be loafed for two weeks. Food loaf – the breakfast, lunch, and dinner of the guilty. Food loaf consists of an inedible blend and bake of several whole meals served, *sans* utensils or cup, in wax paper and brown bag. (Guilty people can lap water from rusty spigots.)

Fortunately, I survived on the charity of my finicky neighbour, Mark, whose unwanted squash and coleslaw were the best dishes I ate in my hungry life. Unfortunately, an officer caught him sharing and informed us that we were guilty of "Interference with Administrative Regulations," a major misconduct. I believed him. So did the hearings officer. As I mentioned, he is a lawyer at the bar and a very astute interpreter of Michigan departmental regulations. Mark and I both got loafed for two more weeks.

The worst guilt I have experienced occurred in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. On the morning of November 14, 2001, I was in the Kinross prison's hobbycraft building, making Christmas gifts for my family, when a squad of guards physically arrested me and escorted me to the hole. They stripped me, then searched my naked, guilty body and tossed me into a small isolation cell. It did not take long to inventory my new surroundings, for there were only three things in the cell: a bunk, a toilet-sink combination, and a video camera. I felt horrible because I knew I must be guilty of something really terrible this time. I waited. I paced. I stared at the ceiling. Finally, the next afternoon, a pompous official read me my rights. Truly, I had done something terrible, for this was bigger than a prison rule infraction. This was a felony crime! He then read me a police report stating that I was under investigation – which, as we have discussed earlier, means

that I am guilty – for sending a letter to a prison official, a letter containing white powder and a threat of anthrax!

Although accustomed to being guilty, I was nevertheless stunned by this revelation. I knew I had nothing to do with anything of this sort. Trusting the state to determine my level of guilt, I offered my DNA, handwriting samples, and a polygraph (lie detector) examination. They returned me to my stifling dead-air cell with no warm water for washing, no writing surface, no access to mail from friends, family, or lawyers but, of course, it did have the ever-vigilant camera scrutinizing my every guilty bodily function.

For two weeks I waited under the silent observation of unseen guards and prison officials, while friends on the prison yard contacted my family and friends and gave them relevant information, letting them know who were the actual guilty parties. My family and friends poured letters and calls to Kinross's Warden Kapture (yes, his real name) and the state police who, without warning, dropped the investigation after two weeks and refused to follow up on leads to the culprit – who was known as a favourite informant of the warden and a member of a religious group to which the warden personally contributed funds.

I was exonerated. Yet I knew I was guilty of something, for the warden transferred me to Michigan's equivalent of Siberia, on the northern side of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Newberry, my new prison, serves two main purposes: high school equivalency education, and punishment of troublemakers. Having a college education, it is doubtful that Warden Kapture sent me to Newberry for educational reasons.

I am guilty and I do not know what to do. I have thought about self-flagellation, but by current valuation standards I would be misusing state property valued over ten dollars. I would confess more often, but the officers seem to resent guilty parties like me dampening their creative initiative.

I am up for parole, but given my overwhelming guilt, release is not likely. But then, I am not sure I want to go home. Who would point out my guilt with such pinpoint precision? Who would see to it that I am punished amply and abundantly? My family assures me that there will be plenty of volunteers, but for now I think I shall just stay here and try to figure out why I am so damn wrong all the time.

If you would like to point out some further guilt, or just drop a few lines to chat, feel free to write me at: James Blau, #214995, Newberry Correctional Facility, 3001 Newberry Avenue, Newberry, Michigan 49868, U.S.A.

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