

Submission, Subservience, 'Model Inmates,' and the Fear Factor: Observations from a Sweet Kamp down Florida Way *Gerald Niles*

The prison system [is] a function of the state – an instrument for class, racial and national oppression ... based upon an unequal distribution of power and opportunity... . Any person or group daring to criticise ... will receive the full brunt of authoritarian vengeance (Clare Culhane 1985).

I bitterly mourn the loss of my freedom. I was convicted by pleading *no contest* to the charge of murder. I was given the option to make the plea or be murdered. I was assured of certain imposition of the death penalty if I did not change my plea of *not guilty* to either *guilty* or *no contest*. Thus I was convicted, and on that same day, I was sentenced to life in prison. In fact, I am innocent of any crime.

The prison in which I now reside is the first one to which I was sent from the reception center. My fellow prisoners and our keepers say that this is a 'sweet camp.' They tell me I should feel 'lucky' to be here. I have now been in the custody of the Florida Department of Corrections since May of 1991, and try as I may, I am unable to make myself feel lucky. I may be here for the rest of my life.

We are all familiar with the base emotion of fear. Fear can be manipulated to such extremes as to be the core means of behavior modification and control in a prison system. Fear is exploited and manipulated by prison officials to induce absolute compliance with, and submission to, the prison regime. I do not have access to information that would disclose logistical facts about this system, but our concern is how a manipulated environment affects behavior. My own observations and experiences inside this 'sweet camp' may provide some insight into the matter.

Rumors here say that non-compliance in any way will result in one's being transferred to some place not so 'sweet.' I have not personally experienced any of those places – yet. The transfers are to 'Hell,' 'bad camps,' and 'good camps.' Hell is Florida State Prison, where the worst imaginable horrors are commonplace. Bad camps are where infinite harassment, such as frequent shake-downs, severe beatings, robbery, and rape reign. Good camps are where all manner of indecency, such as alcohol, drugs, sexual deviance, and violence may be indulged in with minimal interference by the prison officials. Many prisoners who have been to Hell tell me: 'If you cross the Man in Hell, he will make plans for your elimination.' Fearfully, tearfully, I sense this does not exclude assassination.

In Hell, there are special security units known as 'Red Door' and 'Close Management' (CM). The bad camps also have CM. In this confinement status, prisoners can expect twenty-four-hour-per-day lockdown and restriction of all privileges. Such conditions mean no mail, no books, no smoking, no nothing. Only deterioration of mind and body. Red Door is supposed to be for escape risks, but the broad discretion afforded prison officials in the management of their prisons allows a wide margin of arbitrary and capricious classification of prisoners. Solitary confinement can and does accommodate prisoners unwilling to comply with the daily regimen which typically treads on human dignity.

There is also a brand new Death House in Hell. It houses prisoners condemned to be slain by the state, and it is also home to some of the most notorious assaults upon dissenters.

I must confess I am going by postulation, but the point is that rumors (or are they merely rumors?) are a measure of propaganda exploited by the keepers to induce fear-motivated compliance in the sweet camps. There is minimal violence and harassment in the sweet camps because as soon as there is a sign of resistance, the resister will be transferred to Hell, Red Door, CM, and so forth, where physical and psychological brutality will be meted out. *Fear* of this is what holds any prisoner's protest in check.

Being 'kicked to sleep' is a popular expression for literally being stomped into unconsciousness, even death. I am told that this does not happen in the sweet camps, but I was personally subjected to a strip cell and a goon squad here a few months ago. I was conversing with a prison psychologist in her office. Perhaps unwittingly, I stated that I was involved in civil litigation. She excused herself from the room, and in short order, two *huge* guards I had never seen before entered the office. They commanded possession of the legal materials I held in my hand. They then escorted me to a strip cell: no clothing, no bedding, no nothing. Just me, a pair of undershorts, four walls, the floor, and the ceiling.

That evening, two guards wearing combat boots rushed into the cell. Their attitude implied that I was a disgrace to the human race. 'Get in that corner, boy, *NOW!*' they menacingly commanded. Trembling with fear, I humbly crawled into the corner. Their appetite to inflict degradation satiated, they apparently deemed me submissive, and departed.

They let me out of confinement the next day, and my legal materials were returned to me, albeit somewhat disheveled, having apparently been thoroughly examined by my keepers. Later, I learned that the psychologist had justified the confinement by saying that I had threatened suicide. Some therapy.

There is a certain guard in the dorm who starts early every weekday morning with a tirade on the PA system: 'Get them rooms in inspection order! Six-inch collars on them beds! All pictures offa them walls!' This is repeated, booming, a number of times. An assault on the ears and on the nerves. I grumbled about it. Somebody heard me. I was then informed by a hushed voice that the sarge is a friend of the colonel's, and that if word got back to the sarge that I had talked bad about him, I would be promptly shipped on a bus to Hell. The snitch who tells the sarge might be rewarded with a pack of tobacco, or he might be let out early for chow. Snitches are a dime a dozen here. The administration utilizes the control tool of reinforcing the informant mentality.

The weather in Florida is unbearably humid and hot most of the year. There is no air conditioning here, and fans are not allowed. Each cell has a window, no screen, and oodles of bugs. I take this to be one more measure of control – the utilization of nature's elements to inflict misery in the name of Corrections. Florida's 'hotbox' was supposed to have been outlawed long ago.

I have a job. For a small portion of the day I do menial cleaning chores (menial because of my medical status). Work assignments are mandatory; however, the state does not provide a wage for prisoner labor. As for personal needs, I am lucky to have a family able and willing to help me. Many prisoners are not so fortunate. They must get a bottle of shampoo by theft, prostitution, or gambling. There is plenty of time to hustle.

The food is not palatable, but other prisoners tell me it is like the Holiday Inn compared to other prisons. At meal time, I imagine I dived into a dumpster, but I can not believe this so-called food is really quite as good as dumpster vittles eaten on a river bank – any dumpster with integrity would choke on this stuff! (I joke to maintain my sanity.)

For eleven years prior to coming here, I ate a strict vegetarian diet based on religious conscience. The chaplain here refused to provide the required approval for my diet because the standards of my conscience did not fit any definition of religious dietary laws located in his little policy booklet. 'Eat what is served, or starve.'

The hardships of doing time are compounded by any health problems one might face. Whether minor or major, the problems are multiplied by the failure of prison doctors to provide essential medical treatment.

In June of 1990, I was in an auto accident – a head-on collision at 90 mph. But I lived. I was arrested, taken out of the hospital in Texas, and brought to Florida where I was put in jail, and then on to prison. I have never received any adequate medical care, I still suffer from excruciating neck and back pain, I have limited use of my left leg, and head

injuries have caused me problems with concentration and the ability to think as clearly as I once could. I get frustrated and contemplate filing grievances, but my fellow prisoners warn me that I would be risking a transfer to Hell or a bad camp.

I am attempting a post-conviction remedy in court – trying to get my plea set aside and have a fair trial. We must request books from the law library; however, we may only request three books at a time. This restriction basically means that we are limited to such a great extent in our access to the body of the law necessary to conduct effective research, that we are virtually unable to do in one year what a lawyer on the street is able to do in an afternoon. I perceive this to be contrary to the Supreme Court's holding that prisoners retain the fundamental right of meaningful access to the courts, and that the right should remain unfettered. As a precedent to litigation, I wrote to the Secretary of the Department of Corrections about the matter. The law clerks ('model inmates' who know nothing about legal research) obtained a copy of my letter and interpreted it as a threat to their hustle, since they use their exclusive access to law books for gratuity. They anonymously made written threats on my safety to the administration in an attempt to persuade the administration to transfer me from here – and undoubtedly to warn the administration (as good little 'model inmates' do) of pending litigation. Other prisoners have told me that if I file grievances about how the law library operates, I can expect an immediate transfer. Grievance forms are referred to as transfer requests. Once again, an example of the use of fear to discourage dissent.

Repression lurks for any showing of discontent or for any expression of defiance by complaining, or by righteously refusing to acknowledge that life in sweet kamps is in fact sweet.

REFERENCES

Culhane, C. 1985. *Still Barred from Prison*. Montreal: Black Rose Books