

School Daze

Victor Hassine

I was six years old, a brand new arrival to America, and with panicky eyes, I found myself sitting in a classroom for the first time. I could not yet speak or understand English which made my new world experiences that more strange and intimidating. I cowered in a remote corner of the classroom silently listening to words I could not understand and watched children play in ways I could not relate to. The new faces, sounds and activities led me to run home at the end of the school day crying to my mother and begging her not to return me to that classroom full of strangers.

But I did go back, the very next day, forced by my parents to face my fears, in the same way, I am certain, they had to face their own unfamiliarity with America and its ways. Oddly enough, beneath my tears, timidity and suspicion, I felt an overpowering combination of urge and sadness. The sadness came from not being able to be a part of the fun and camaraderie I had witnessed, while the urge was a strong desire to belong to the community of classmates. It was this collusion by my sadness and desire that gave direction to my gathering herd instincts, which I can now identify as my want to belong.

With time, my fears of school faded, but my want to belong grew stronger and more demanding. Fortunately, American schools exploit that primitive human want and use it to anonymously move children along the path of social utility and conformity.

Once the school identified my skills, I was encouraged to join groups, organizations and committees specially designed to enhance my abilities and performance. Basically, I was led in one of two directions; sports or academics. If I was athletic, I could join an array of sporting organizations. If I was found to be academically inclined, scholastic clubs were open to me. All of these very different groups were nevertheless united in their mission to satisfy my hunger to belong, while at the same time reward my performance and achievements.

This nudging and prodding happened without me being aware of it. I just thought I was going to school. I never guessed that my want to belong was being manipulated to help me overcome language and culture differences and to ultimately lead me to a university degree in Law.

ON WANTING TO BE A BRIGAND

Some nineteen years after the experiences of my first day in school, I arrived at Graterford and some of those same boyhood emotions revisited. Of course, there was that same nervousness of being in a new and strange community except this time my apprehensions were more intense because of worries for my personal safety. And then there was that same lingering joined pair of emotions; sadness and desire.

I had entered prison with a healthy suspicion of every one. Aggravating my doubts, was the pervasive use of jailhouse slang by both prisoners and staff. Once again, I found myself in a frightening world where I could not understand the language or behaviour of its people. And then there was that loud haunting whisper of mystery and adventure, drawing me to danger in its urging to belong, belong, belong!

True the jailhouse slang used by prisoners and staff was vulgar and aggressive, everything being said with arrogant certainty and selfish importance. But there was also an unbridled, reckless honesty which hinted at unconditional tolerance for the opinions and beliefs of others.

And then there was the way everyone, staff and prisoners alike, seemed to know each other personally; almost intimately. They laughed and interacted like siblings even when there was anger between them. This familiarity was so apparent that it seemed as if the prison was one big clan.

So I wanted to belong. I wanted to speak the language, know the secrets, and possess the acceptance of the clan. Clinical analysis of this misplaced wanting might explain these romantic notions in terms of denial, compensation for fear, shame, criminality or even the Stockholm Syndrome. I personally can not explain it. All I can say is that the assemblage of infamous outlaws, doing simply what such men do in a prison, had me wanting to be a brigand.

CHOOSING SIDES

When I first came to Graterford, aside from noticing the obvious fact that most of the prisoner population consisted of African American men, I never really gave much thought to the impact my race or religion would have on my well being.

At the time, Graterford boasted an 80 percent African American population. There was a large and well-established Black Muslim community with the vast majority of prisoners coming from Philadelphia. The Superintendent was a black man as was the Major of the Guards. But none of these factors could overcome the consequences of the fact that at least 80 percent of the prison staff were white Christians, most of whom were raised in the rural communities on the outskirts of the prison. This extreme imbalance between the racial, regional and religious composition of the staff and the prisoner population accurately reflected the dysfunction of the prison generally.

Non-white prisoners were embraced by the prisoner population while suspiciously scrutinized by the staff, who tended to reserve for the white prisoners the benefit of the rehabilitative doubt. And while the prisoner population did not much concern itself with one's religious beliefs, except when it was time to recruit prisoners for religious organizations, the staff's religious orientation made Christian observance a sign of contrition, in search of salvation, on the path of redemption, which translated into parole eligibility. Therefore, men who were both non-white and non-Christian were readily accepted by the prisoner population but were at the centre of the staff's doubts and distrust.

Bias benefiting those who are part of a ruling class is understandable and even to be expected. So what actually defined race relations at Graterford was not the unabashed racial and religious favouritism. It was the divisiveness and relentlessness of competition between the prisoners for favour of the administration. Everybody in the prison was forced to play the race game because the only group identity available to prisoners was based on skin colour and religious beliefs.

Unlike a school, penitentiaries do not promote group activity or identity. Individuals are hard enough to control in a prison without giving men license to join in what might eventually turn into cliques or gangs. Furthermore, prisons have no interest in gauging the performance or identifying the skills and enhancing the ability of its prisoners. Graterford was in the business of confinement, and so its entire security force was geared toward discouraging and punishing group affiliations.

All prisoners were issued identical uniforms. There were strictly enforced rules against more than five prisoners congregating together. Circulating a petition was forbidden, while guards and counsellors were constantly directing prisoners to look out only for themselves and not

worry about the other criminals around them. And while particular prisoner social and religious organizations were given permission to operate in the prison, the administration made rules governing participation in such groups so cumbersome that they constituted an organization only in name.

Vacuums and voids are dangerous things because they are eventually filled by things not intended and sometimes unwanted. While Graterford certainly could punish a man's attempts to belong, it could not eliminate his want to belong. So the minute I entered the prison, its dynamics went silently at work coaxing me towards racial polarization; trying hard to convince me that doing time was as simple as black and white.

THE HERDS

Generally, black gangs in Graterford are mere extensions of Philadelphia neighbourhood street gangs. Like Philadelphia gangs, Graterford's prison gangs have names deriving from their locations in the city. These gangs have names like 21st and Noris, 60th and Market, 10th Street, etcetera. Many of the black prison gang members had also been members of the original gang when they were out on the streets.

The way Philadelphia neighbourhood street gangs had been able to develop in prison is simple. Street gang members who were incarcerated and sent to Graterford to do their time joined together to carry on the gang's traditions. As more and more street gang members arrived at Graterford, they eventually became numerically significant enough to conduct gang activities.

When an African American prisoner comes into Graterford, scouts immediately go about determining what part of Philadelphia the man came from and whether he had ever been a member of a street gang. It is this sorting of black prisoners based on geographics that not only dictates the character of black prison gangs but also gave rise to the often used prison slang, "Homee," which refers to an prisoner coming from the same neighbourhood or hometown. Black prison gang members are continuously recruiting their Homees for membership in their gang.

Black prison gangs compete with each other for turf and the control of contraband sales. While this competition often results in violent battles, various gangs will nevertheless unify in many of their enter-

prises. For example, rival black prison gangs might fight each other over the business of selling drugs, while they would still work together to bring the drugs into the prison.

Black prisoners not from Philadelphia could count on Graterford hosting a gang formed by men from the area of their hometown. What makes these gangs different from the black Philly gangs is that, for the most part, these black prison gangs have no counterparts on the streets. These non-Philly gangs originated in the prison and its members are often strangers who just happen to be from the same county or city.

The competition between regional black prison gangs and black Philly prison gangs tends to be very hostile and violent. There is seldom any trust or cooperation between them. Numerically, Philly gangs greatly outnumbered the other gangs, which allow them to dominate and completely exclude them from joint ventures.

But even without numerical superiority, it is my guess that Philly neighbourhood gangs would still command in Graterford because gangs that have carried over into the prison from the streets have the very important advantage of functioning under well-established rules, organizational structures, leadership systems and ideologies. In contrast, prison gangs that originate entirely in the prison tend to be weakened by frequent power struggles, uncertain leadership and untested organizational processes.

Because Graterford's black prison gangs are rooted almost completely in geographical distinctions, gang membership is diverse. When examining the members of any of these black prison gangs, you can expect to encounter a collection of drug addicts, thieves, murderers and hustlers. You will also find Muslims, Christians and Atheists; all members of the same gang. This heterogeneous collection of "Homees" gives the black gangs at Graterford a dynamic that makes it hard for individuals to resist feelings of commonality and harder still for the administration to break them apart. These gangs resemble an octopus with many, many tentacles.

Black gangs at Graterford primarily operate as money making enterprises. If it was neighbourhoods that brought prison gang members together, it is money and drugs that keeps them together. Everything black prison gangs at Graterford do is to earn money. This means selling anything anyone is willing to buy. The money raised is then used to buy more contraband for sale and use.

Many gang members send money home to help support their families. It is almost as if gang members gauge their value as human beings by the amount of money they are able to raise. What is done with the money is unimportant because the true purpose of prison gang life seems to be in the hustle, with the money earned being merely an indicator of how good a hustler someone is.

White gangs at Graterford are completely different. Almost all of these gangs originated in prison. Like the black non-Philly prison gangs, these gangs are not well-structured or established because they mostly consist of members who are strangers to each other; brought together by the simple chance of their skin colour.

Numerically, the white gangs in Graterford are the overwhelming minority. This means that white prison gangs are mainly formed for protection from the other gangs. While a white prison gang might do some hustling, it cannot do too much of it because it cannot protect its turf or business interests against the larger black gangs. So white gangs are more often the consumers/purchasers of drugs and other contraband.

Also, most of the white gangs are not brought together by geographics. These gangs are generally held together by a desire to protect mutual interests. White drug addicts at Graterford will join together for safety and to pool their funds to buy drugs at a volume discount. There are white gangs of Catholics, Italians and Protestants, who socialize together and protect each other. White gamblers will often join together as will jailhouse wine-makers and body builders. In fact, white gangs at Graterford are really just small groups of individuals rather than gangs with a purpose.

White gangs are generally much smaller and less diverse than their black counterparts. Where black gangs need large memberships to generate income and protect their turf, white gangs need as few members as possible to stretch their resources. Also, a white gang that was too large would attract the attention of the black gangs which constantly challenged the commitment of prison gangs that get too big.

The exception to this are the outlaw motorcycle gangs that have managed to establish themselves in Graterford. All of their members are white men who were members of the same gang out on the street. This means that, like the black Philly gangs, they are business-oriented and not just protection seekers. They compete directly with the black gangs in the sale of contraband. Despite their relatively small numbers in the

prison, their cohesiveness and connections to the much larger street gangs makes them a power to be reckoned with. It also makes them good money makers; their hustle being almost exclusively in the sale of drugs.

THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS

I was sitting on the toilet in Harun's cell killing some time. It was a cold winter weekend and the morning chill managed to soak through the concrete walls. The block was open for recreation which meant you could choose to freeze in the yard or hang around on the block running the ranges until lockdown at lunchtime.

"I understand why guys in here join gangs and fight each other over their hustles. I mean it's like that out on the streets, but why?" I emphasized, "Why do they have to hate and hurt each other so much?"

As the prison gods would have it, a few months after I had lost my job in the Major's office, Harun was hired to take my place. This meant he now lived on the block with me, and I could visit him in his cell. We ate meals together, went to the yard together, and did a lot of jailhouse philosophizing. We became inseparable and one of the unusual sights in Graterford; a kindly looking, bearded, dark-skinned black Muslim from Philadelphia walking alongside a young Jewish man from New Jersey, arguing about one thing or another.

"What don't you understand, or is it you don't want to understand?" Harun asked, not really giving me his full attention yet brandishing his usual jovial grin on his chubby face.

Harun had done time for a homicide in New York, but he was born and raised in Philadelphia and had served in the military. He knew many of the men in Graterford and understood the workings of the prison. So as it turned out, in addition to becoming my closest friend, Harun became my window into prison life. He knew the language, the games, the players, and the dangers, but most importantly, he was willing to share his insights with me. That is how Harun became my Old Head and I his eager student.

Like a thirsty sponge, I spent hours sitting on the toilet in my Old Head's cell, absorbing whatever he told me. He would answer my questions and challenge my conclusions. Harun's wisdom and profound understanding of the prison system had me mesmerized by the brave new world he revealed. It was almost as if he were walking me through a for-

eign country I had never known existed. While it was a place of danger, it boldly promised excitement, mystery and adventure. This was certainly not the America I had grown up in.

It took me many years to realize that the Graterford I had been thrust into, and which Harun had formally introduced me to, was really an obscure portion of the American dream I had been chasing most of my life. Because I never bothered to look behind the dream I never noticed the long, dark and crowded shadow that trailed; that now had me locked in its darkness.

I shifted a little on the toilet seat. Though Harun had stacked old newspapers on top of the commode to act as a cushion, I still could not get comfortable. "Why don't you ever just answer the question?" I asked.

As usual, my Old Head was sitting on the cold, hard concrete floor of his cell just a few feet away. He was facing its threshold, which was slightly behind me, looking down trying to write a letter to his wife and children. His cell was drab, mostly containing only State-issued clothing, bedding and some old newspapers.

However, he did allow himself the luxury of an old bruised radio, given to him by a prisoner who had finally gone home. It was a sad looking thing, threatening to fall apart at anytime. But it picked up the jazz and news station which was all my Old Head needed.

I once asked Harun why he chose to live so spartan. I even offered to let him use my radio, which he refused and said, "I don't like people taking things away from me. If I don't have anything in here that's mine, then the authorities can't take any more away from me than they already have. Besides, I don't think it's healthy for a man to get too comfortable in prison."

Harun finally broke the silence. "It's obvious, you're not going to let me finish writing this letter to my wife, are you?" He put down his pen on the floor, took off his glasses and began pulling down on his salt and pepper beard. Meanwhile, a prison guard walked by, looked in and nodded his head. Technically, I was not allowed to enter another man's cell, but that rule had never been enforced, at least not since I had been on the block. "Now what is it you want to know about?"

"We were talking about hate and violence and why there's so much of it in here, especially between blacks and whites," I said a little annoy-

ed that my friend had apparently forgotten what I thought we had been discussing for a while.

“You might have been talking about that,” he chuckled, “but I was trying to keep my wife interested in me.” He said this as he watched some prisoners walk past.

“Come on, Roon,” I half-laughed. “I said I understand the gangs, the competition and the hustling. Business is business, I guess a man has to do something to stay busy in here. But you must admit the violence in here is outrageous. People hate each other here - not dislike but real hate.”

Harun shook his head as he cautiously watched more prisoners walk by. “I don’t know why you need to ask a question like that. This is prison and it is what it is. What more does a man need to know. It’s not like you’re going to try and change anything. You wouldn’t want to lose your TV privileges, would you?” he asked sarcastically.

“That was ugly,” I answered. “But how do you know what I’d do? Besides, you don’t have a TV and I don’t see you trying to change anything.”

Harun laughed out loud and got up off the floor to sit on his bunk which was right beside me. “You young guys coming to prison these days are really something else. You all think everything has to have an answer and that you’re ready for the answers you do get.”

After a long stare loaded with silence, my Old Head continued, “It’s all a game.” His ever present grin vanished.

“What, that’s it? That’s what you think? All the beatings, stabbings and killing over cigarettes and commissary is a game? It’s no game. Men dying is no game,” I protested.

Harun adjusted his body a little as he looked at me in amazement. I must have been a bit more excited than I intended. With a gentle but serious tone he cautioned, “Are you going to argue with me or are you going to listen to what I have to say, because I don’t feel like doing a whole lot of arguing with you this morning.”

I sat quietly on the lumpy stack of old newspapers, waiting for Harun to share his view of the restless shadow we lived in. Meanwhile, varying shades of gray prisonscape images scrolled in front of us, as if a black and white movie were being projected on to the framed opening of his cell. Silent, unfriendly faces seemed to glide by in some primitive

drive to keep moving, look inside things and never smile. This kind of footage is what kept a man at all times alert in his cell.

“Most of the hate and anger in here is all a game,” Harun repeated. “A hustle, just another way for people in prison to make money from something they can get their hands on real easy. Anger and hatred are a prison’s cash crop!”

“When whites hate blacks they are stealing the sympathy and favour of a mostly white and Christian administration. When blacks hate whites they are strongarming appeasements and concessions. The administration, they get the most. Violence and hatred in prison means more money, more guards, overtime and more prison. What incentive is there to keep prisons safe and humane? All staff has to do is sit back and let the men in prison tear each other apart so they can then cry to the legislatures and tell them how much more money they need because their prison is out of control. Just like with the prison swag men, dope boys, and laundry men, there’s something being sold and money being made. Only it’s a lot more money than most of the guys in here can even imagine. It’s a lot easier for everyone to profit from the hatred in here than it is to help the poor and ignorant do something positive with his life.”

“Come on, Harun, you can’t believe that stuff,” I interrupted. “You’re sounding real paranoid, like there’s a conspiracy everywhere.” I recalled Double D’s belief that the administration was actually encouraging gang activity in the prison. I found it interesting that Harun and Double D were so similar in their thinking, but I was not ready to believe either of them. The prison was too chaotic to be that deliberate.

“Well, then you tell me why with all the guards, guns, locks, gates, walls and money, they still can’t stop what’s going on in here?” he asked.

I really had no answer. In fact, it was a question I often asked myself. “Okay, Harun, if this is all a game and everybody knows it, then why do the men in here play it? Why do they play when it can get them hurt and even killed? Tell me that?” I was certain this question would get Harun to rethink his position.

Harun stood up and smiled confidently. “It’s like a Dodge City crap game in here, Victor, everyone knows it’s crooked, but they play it anyway - because it’s the only game in town!”

He then ran me out of his cell so he could finish writing his letter.