PENAL POLICY: BEYOND THE SOUNDBITES, SOCIAL METAPHORS AND PUBLIC MISPERCEPTIONS

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Introduction

In 2004, I was charged with one count of 'making a false statement to a federal officer'. In my mind, I was 'protecting a friend', in the government's opinion, I was 'obstructing justice'. At the time of my crime, I was 38 years old and was about to complete my PhD. I had just accepted a full-time tenure track teaching position. As a non violent, first-time offender, I was originally sentenced to six months at a work camp, but when that facility was damaged in a hurricane, I was subsequently designated to the Federal Correctional Institute (FCI) in Tallahassee, Florida. I served my time and was released in May 2005. Following my release, I spent five years on supervised probation. Other than this charge, I have no criminal record. There were many tearful nights when I was certain I would never teach again. I am forever indebted to the Convict Criminology Group for believing in me, for being the catalyst to my professional re-entry, and for providing me with much-needed friendship and support.

In writing articles such as this, the difficulty for me is in knowing how best to discuss my journey through the system, as well as the ever-evolving and enduring impact of decisions I made years ago. The depth of my embarrassment seems limitless, and the hold this experience has on my conscience seems unbearable. I feel compelled to disclose the painful experiences of my family and my friends, the losses I have felt and the indignities I have been subjected to, and my own feelings of violation and the nightmares that continue today. I hope that I can somehow contribute to the scholarly discourse on prison policy with a look inside the hidden and convoluted world of government sanctioned punishment, through the eyes of a woman who lived through it, and all those women who continue to live it.

Time has changed how I perceive and interpret my experiences at FCI Tallahassee, and though it's been over seven years since my release, the memories remain clear and vivid. There are times I am struck by a particular smell, or a sound, or even a random face in a crowd. I am often able to tuck these thoughts away in a mental and emotional compartment

that allows me to function in my day-to-day life. It does not take me long, however, to re-open and expose that place in my head, revealing the pain and the meaningless loss of self that was all around me. As convicts, we will forever be stained by the various and often blatant acts of brutality, as well as even the most subtle acts of degradation or violation and coercion couched conveniently in policy for safety and facility security. Even with short-term incarceration, I could not help but witness (and ultimately bear) the inescapable transformation of the woman I once was into the convict I became. There are many certainties in prison, not the least of which is the inevitable assimilation into a culture that is unique to convicts:

> The sound of a person walking in leg irons is unmistakable, strangely rhythmic and melodic. Maybe it's the paper shoes, a muffled rustling on the cement. How strange to see a woman hunched over in an ill-fitted carrot suit (the orange government-issued jumpsuit), hands and feet bound, faces that are empty and expressionless, following a guard clearly unconcerned as he walked quickly and without emotion. I hear the jingling of chains in my sleep, I wonder how long it will take me to get used to this world – to watching the arrival ceremony of new shipments (slang terms for inmates); to the knot in my stomach that won't go away; until I see myself the way others do, as insignificant and worthless (Personal Journal Entry, 2004).

Why would we Expect Anything Different?

My experience within the walls of FCI Tallahassee seems to support the research that most women are sentenced for nonviolent crimes such as fraud or drug-related offenses (see Owen, 1998; Belknap, 2001; BJS Fact Sheet, 2005, NCJ 210677). However, any attempt to characterize female offenders must be hedged by disclaimers, as no single description can capture the variety of etiologies, traits, susceptibilities, or sheer randomness of influences that impel people to violate the law. I would suggest that the typical female offender, being non white, poor, and a single parent, is repeatedly victimized by society. She is expected to work to support herself and her children and to be a good parent; when she finds these expectations impossible to fulfill, and resorts to crime, she is punished. Yet no assistance was forthcoming to help meet the expectations of medical and family care. She is caught in an un-

winnable situation. Most of the women I encountered came from poverty, were addicted to drugs or alcohol, and had emotional or mental health problems. My 'Bunkie' (one with whom you share your bunk) explained her life this way:

> …sure I tried to work real jobs, but something always came up and I got fired or I had to quit. My mom was real sick, and if she didn't get her meds, she couldn't take care of my kids. I was making minimum wage and it felt like I was working only enough to pay for medical stuff for my babies and rent to keep us all off the streets. It's not like I woke up one morning and decided that turning tricks was the answer, but my babies' daddies didn't help no one. Society has put out there all these things people should strive for, except not all of us get the same chances to get there [Personal Journal Entry, 2005].

Another woman made this statement:

> I've been a prostitute for years; I've been beaten, raped, and sold …. but I fed my kids and I had a place for my momma to live. Nobody never wanted to help me then, but now all of a sudden they want to lock me up. It ain't my priorities that need to change, it's how to keep those priorities and not be killed in the meantime (Personal Journal Entry, 2005).

Many of the women I met struggled to recognize the patterns of violence and addiction, while also acknowledging the cycle of abuse and generational poverty that plagued their families. For most, their crimes were not committed to *avoid* legitimate jobs or careers, but rather *in response to* years of desperation and deprivation. This is certainly not to condone or excuse their behaviors, but rather attempts by otherwise decent women to survive in neighborhoods and communities where so many men have been taken away, swept up in our massive imprisonment binge, but also ravaged by decline of local businesses, job opportunities, and deterioration of local schools.

I'd spent years reading about and studying the criminal justice system, but those words meant very little to me, even now. As I study the literature and explore the topic with my

students, I am struck by the lack of "humanness" offenders are given. Criminals are the last group of Americans that it is socially acceptable to hate. In the academic books and media accounts, criminals are blank, devoid of personal nature, emotion and livelihood. I remember sitting in my prison bunk listening to the many and varied women as they told their stories. I could not help but be drawn into their worlds; worlds I vaguely understood, but often times would find their way into my dreams. At times I found myself actively involved in their lives; to live with these women in such close proximity meant a sort of forced involvement, but what was awkward and uncomfortable at first, became solace and binding. All that I had read about and studied meant nothing as I spent my time living, learning, and growing with these women. Official data means little in prison, it becomes the faces, the lives, the stories, and even the deaths; this is what matters and these are the people who give these stories meaning.

> … for me it is a struggle to remember who I am … and to not allow myself to be degraded just because I made a mistake. Everyone does. That is not who I am or who we are. I don't want to become the person the criminal justice system says I am [Personal Correspondence, 2007].

Apathy in Suffering

The activity on the prison compound was as varied as the women that filled its walls. I met women from all walks of life, and somehow we all had to learn to adapt to our new environment. It is a world like no other, and each day (and night) brought something new. Prison reality is indeed harsh and unrelenting, with a hidden culture of norms, values, and social roles not seen on the outside; a milieu that seemed to force us to think only in surviving day to day. "Hope" seemed to be discouraged, although subtle glimpses of what *could be* permeated the walls and the visions of a life not lived. For many, this was their life, and to have hope or to dream of a better life would just make prison time that much more painful. I would only be there for a short time, but the weight of my future felt oppressive and heavy, and I was certain that if I could not shut out that part of my thinking, I would surely be crushed to death. I had to survive now, and that meant I had to learn to reconcile myself to prison life and the immediacy of the violence and the bedlam, but also to the mundane and the monotonous.

> I hate this place. There is an awkward, nauseating aroma – a mixture of flowers and feminine hair products, watered-down disinfectant, and rotten meat (contraband left in someone's locker). I hate how the women smell. I hate how the guards smell. I hate how I smell. I hate that you can predict how the day/evening will go by the sickening cologne that wafts in from the main office of the unit – the predictability of knowing which guards are on duty, whether I will sleep tonight, or whether it will be another night of 'anything goes'. I hate how the male guards leer and the female guards chastise. I hate this place. (Personal Journal Entry, 2004).

The highlight of my day was the time spent on 'the patio' (the cement stoops that lined the prison compound) with friends. It is here that I found some of my most intense connections to others. This happened as we sometimes sat in comfortable silence, but also as we shared with each other our journeys through life. We discussed, almost dissected, our lives prior to prison. We recounted stories of pain and unimaginable sorrow and loss, our lessons of love, of resourcefulness and forgiveness, the necessity of laughter, our courage to take risks, and our willingness to fight for those things we believed in most. Somehow this emotional cleansing, to women so very different from me (or anyone I knew), had a way of healing old wounds. It seems so strange now as I look back, remembering the past with new insight and appreciation for all that I have learned.

Most of us would never have been friends in any other world; we were friends now by virtue of a shared criminality. I met strong and gifted women; devoted to their families, blessed in their friendships with others, and humbled by the grace of God. I met women who'd spent years being battered and beaten. While I did meet women from power, wealth, and money, the majority of women struggled against abuse, poverty, limited resources and a dismal outlook for the future. Many of these women are uneducated, but not stupid. They are tired; they are out of hope, love, and opportunities. They have simply given up on a society that gave up on them a long time ago:

> Some young poor white girl tried to kill herself the other day by jumping from the roof of the chapel – she lived, but they say she's pretty fucked up … (Personal Correspondence, 2008).

> I was out on the track today, in my own world as usual, when L. came running up behind me and mockingly jumped on my back. We laughed and hugged, and recanted stories of the day. We listened to music on our portable radios, made fun of each others' dancing abilities, and shared stories about loved ones in our lives. How is it in a world so far away I find companionship and emotional freedom like nothing I've ever experienced? Is it because all the superficial bullshit means nothing here? Is it because degradation and humiliation have stripped away our exterior? Is it because we share an experience that has so profoundly changed us (Personal Journal Entry, 2004)

> Sitting with P. on the patio, I can almost forget where I am. I awoke to the usual fighting and screaming – God I hate the ghetto hollering. I made my bunk, fixed my coffee, and wandered outside knowing she would be there The anxiety dissipates with a friendly wave and a comforting smile. Today, like many, we discuss failure. She has been here six years, and I think how lucky she must be – she doesn't seem to fear failure, but rather seems to embrace it (Personal Journal Entry, 2005).

Even now, years after my incarceration, I find myself consumed with the lives of the women I left behind. I am relieved and blessed at where life has taken me, but I feel a deep sense of loss and guilt for those who remain caged, tucked neatly out of public sight. How strange it must sound to outsiders. We are, after all, merely criminals, without feelings, lesser in spirit and lacking in heart. I get phone calls periodically from some of the women in various facilities. On a good day, with no dropped or interrupted calls, the allotted 15 minutes seems to fly, and strangely, it is as if I have been transported back in time. Very few people will understand how or why I look forward to these calls. Not only is it a chance to make sure the woman with whom I am talking is physically safe, but on a very personal level, it allows me a brief moment in time when it is OK to be an ex-con. I have amazing friends and family who

have been nothing but loving and supportive, but for those all too rare 15 minutes, my walls can come completely down, and that place in my soul that I work so hard to hide opens up - it is both painful and liberating. For that brief period in time, I am completely exposed, and yet I feel more at ease in those moments than most others in my day. I cannot explain it, nor do I really want to try. It just is, and I long for those times more than I particularly care to admit:

> Behind these walls are some of the most beautiful women I have ever seen – elegant, demur, and proud; stunning even. Unfortunately, most of the women around me, although they try to hide it, project a look of death and desperation. The effects of drugs and alcohol so vividly clear; the toll time has taken on their faces and the permanent stains of abuse that mark their bodies and their minds. The vacant look in their eyes and the stories they tell haunt me (Personal Journal Entry, 2005).

Conclusion

Common thought has it that the prison system is not so bad, and that prison time is easy or inconsequential (Johnson, 2002). Prisons today are indeed far less cruel than when they were first invented, but that does not mean that incarceration is an experience without pain. In place of physical suffering, the modern prison inflicts a far more severe damage that is spiritual and social in nature. The loss of freedom is indeed fundamental, as is the loss of social status and the lifetime of labelling that come with being a convict. Chuck Terry, also a former convict, proffers that in addition to the physical adjustment to isolation in an over-crowded and often violent world, there is a psychological adjustment that must be made as well. The problem is not simply being locked up with hundreds of strangers, but is also with the difficulty of having one's self-esteem and identity inundated with the evidence of an unsuccessful life and the view that you are somehow less human and less worthy. Few see prison as an intricate social and psychological world, where the individual is extraordinarily overwhelmed and hampered with challenges so profound that one's very own identity is at stake (Terry, 2000). There is a self-loathing that develops among convicts (myself included), a personal feeling of diminished self-worth perpetuated by a system more concerned with effectiveness and efficiency than with human life.

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