

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

September 12, 2011

Labor Day In Prison

I am writing this at 8:30 a.m. on Labor Day at Stanley Prison (to be typed and posted later). I am sitting in the day room on a round, steel plate attached to a square steel table which is bolted to the floor. There are less than 2 dozen prisoners in the day room; the rest are in their cells, most likely sleeping. In the free world, this holiday is a chance for people to take a day off, spend time with their families, maybe have cookout in the back yard or do a few chores around the house.

For us in prison, idleness is a way of life.

What passes for a job in prison is often only a do-nothing assignment to pad the employment stats. Each of the five housing units in Stanley employ two eight-man crews of "full-time" cart pushers to transport the carts containing our meals to and from the main kitchen. The crews work on alternate days for 10 or 15 minutes before and after each meal. They are considered "full-time" employees and get paid for a full week of work.

There are also crews for the unit serveries and janitorial duties. These guys must put in much more work, comparatively speaking, so there are 3 crews each of which only works every third day.

The rest of the time, these guys can play cards or board games, watch TV or go to recreation or library if their unit is scheduled for it. There is not much to do. Prisoners are only allowed outside of their cells for up to 10½ hours per day and are not allowed to leave the housing unit for most of that time.

These mens' lives are slowly bleeding away in meaningless tedium under conditions which encourage idleness and irresponsibility. How many years of enforced idleness does it take before it becomes a way of life? How many prisoners are released from prison expecting to live in society without having to work?

Isn't there a better way to run prisons? Shouldn't there be jobs, opportunities for self-improvement and earn some money?

It wasn't always like this. In the past 27 years I have watched the changes.

I used to have a hobby making leather goods. Until 2000, I kept all of my leather working tools and supplies in my room with me. I was selling on average \$300 per month in finished leather items. Many of my finished products were sold to staff members. But DOC bureaucrats put an end to the leather hobby and I had to dispose of all my tools and supplies.

Eleven years later and hobbies are more restricted than ever. It is not possible to sell \$300 per month in hobby projects. There are now restrictions on how much profit margin is allowed per item and limits on how much raw material can be ordered and kept on hand.

In my opinion, the major reason for these restrictions is to limit a prisoner's ability to earn money. A broke prisoner is more easily controlled than one who has an income. A prisoner dares not speak out against the prison administration for fear he will be black-balled and unable to get one of the low-paying prison jobs. There are hundreds of unemployed prisoners so there is a lot of competition for scarce prison jobs, even if they only pay pennies per hour. When you don't have any money, even a few dollars is worth working for.

Prison jobs pay from 5¢/hour for unassigned prisoners up to 42¢/hour for the highest paid prisoners (only 5% of the prisoners are allowed to earn the highest rate). Most prisoners work for 26¢/hour or less. Even in prison where all basic needs are theoretically provided, \$20 every two weeks is not enough money to live on.

The State provides 3 meals per day, prison clothes, soap and toothpaste. Prisoners must purchase everything else that they have whether it be shampoo, deodorant, razors or dental floss. Prisoners are allowed to have TVs, radios and personal workout clothing - but only if they can figure out a way to pay for it. For most prisoners, it means asking already-burdened family members to buy items for them.

But wait, there's more. The State also deducts 10% of all incoming money to be placed in a release account to be used upon release. The account is capped at \$5,000. Unfortunately, it would take about 50 years at 26¢/hour to reach the \$5,000 level.

There is also the Wisconsin Prison Litigation reform Act (PLRA) which was created in the 1990s to force prisoners to pay for all litigation they file. If the prisoner doesn't have enough money to pay filing and service fees, his prison account is frozen and all his money goes to the court until the fee is paid. It is a very good deterrent to filing legal actions against prison officials. A simple judicial review of an administrative decision (a parole denial, denial of transfer or finding of guilty on a conduct report) costs \$129.50 to file and \$30-40 to serve. Add to this postage and photocopy costs and seeking fair treatment through judicial intervention becomes prohibitive.

Since 2008, I have spent thousands of dollars on filing and litigating court actions against the parole commission and classification director. I was removed from a work release center for no reason and sent back to a prison twice since 2008. Each time I was told it is because of my current offense and prior criminal record - neither of which has changed in 27 years. DOC officials have also spent thousands of dollars in staff time, representation by the Wisconsin Attorney General's Office and in holding me in higher security facilities.

I am fortunate in one aspect. Before this ordeal started in 2008, I was able to go on work release and save up almost \$10,000. Sadly, after 3 years of trying to right the wrongs done to me, I have less than \$4,000 remaining.

Since coming to Stanley in January, my poetry has become dismal and uninspired. The poems I have thus far posted were written before my transfer. Today, I am going to include some Stanley poems.

What Prison Teaches

I don't trust anybody
Who is nice to me.
Prison has taught me
People aren't nice
Unless they want
Something from you
You don't want to give them.
The most adept predators
Know that
Velvet glove over steel fist
Often gets the best result.

Devolution

In an internet age where
World wide web connects
Everybody everywhere
I've never sent an email,
Surfed the web or twittered.

When ebooks replace paper books,
Snail mail is no longer delivered,
And newspapers are published online,
I'll still be a luddite living
In the Dark Ages.

Facebook toppled tyranny everywhere
Except Amerika, where corporate
Hegemony wields governmental authority
In a prison-industrial complex
Feeding on human frailty.

Enslaved under the only
Constitutional exception,
Alone and out of touch,
We are tortoises isolated in
Galapagos prisons
Devolving as society evolves.

Harlan Richards

I Wonder . . .

Is it better to be trapped behind
Prison walls so high you can't see
The bottoms of the trees,
Or surrounded by razor wire
Where there are no trees?
When you no longer see
The razor wire, does that mean
You've been in prison long enough?
Or too long?

Harlan Richards