

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

September 19, 2011 - How Much Time Is Enough?

I was in the dayroom the other day sitting at a table with 3 other guys when someone made an off-hand remark about how much time was gathered around one table. I was curious so we added up our time served. Between the 4 of us we have served 100 years - the longest being 27 years and the shortest being 22 years. We then added our ages and came up with 200 years - the oldest was 57 and the youngest was 43. Of course we had to enjoy a moment of gallows humor and comment about all these newcomers around here with only 10 or 15 years served.

But getting back to the century club, all of us have completed all required treatment programs and none of us have had a conduct report in decades. We are all older white guys who committed serious crimes when we were young. We no longer pose a threat to anyone yet we are being warehoused in one of the most restrictive prisons in Wisconsin.

A guy made a comment to me a while back when I was talking about how safe it is in the Wisconsin prison system. In his opinion, the reason it is so safe is that the majority of guys being warehoused these days clearly don't belong in prison. I had to agree he made a good point. When I arrived at Stanley in January 2011, one of the first things I noticed was that there are a large number of old white guys here. There are a few older minority prisoners but nowhere near the number of white guys. Over half of Wisconsin's prison population is made up of minorities. The percentage would be much higher if the old white guys were released. Of course I can't give you exact numbers because, as a prisoner, I am not allowed access to public records in Wisconsin. All I can report is what I see and give my opinion on it. Perhaps someone out there would like to request the data from the DOC and prove me right - or wrong, whichever the case may be.

All of this warehousing comes at a cost. In the recent 2011-13 biennial budget, corrections was \$2.5 billion. It now comprises 7% of the state budget, compared to 1989 when it was only 2.9% (that was the last year before corrections was spun off from the Dept. of Health and Social Services to become a department in its own right). Wisconsin now spends more general revenue funds on corrections than it does higher education.

With all the talk about jobs and the need to retrain workers I was surprised to hear on the radio that Wisconsin's university system has had its budget cut by \$250 million over the next two years. Wisconsin's technical schools have had their budget reduced by \$72 million which equals a loss of 30% of the State's previous contribution. Gov. Walker claims that these shortfalls can be made up by reducing the wages of teachers and other employees since he took away their collective bargaining rights. The reality is that there is fierce competition for qualified instructors and professors from the private, for-profit schools. Lower wages will mean less-qualified teachers and a lower-quality education for students.

It would seem to me that less-qualified workers will have a disadvantage in competing in the job market, thus making it more likely that an unemployed person will turn to crime to make a living. This, of course, will result in greater demand for prison beds to house the next generation of criminals. Hence Gov. Walker will receive plaudits for his prescience in increasing the corrections budget in anticipation of the growth in prison population his policies will create.

Such is the legacy of right-wing ideologue Scott Walker.

The Musician

My thick, clumsy fingers
Stumble across the notes
Of my keyboard in a manner
Which would make a 5-year old
Beginner look like a concert pianist.
Yet those halting notes I drag
Forth by their roots in an agonizing
Exercise of pure obstinacy
Sound to me like a chorus of angels
Singing God's own song.
It's not the quality of the sound
As it batters my ears
But how it makes me feel when
My fingers caress those keys and
Evoke the haunting melody that
Feeds the craving in my soul.

Harlan Richards