

"YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH"

TEARS FROM THE DEATH OF PRISON REFORM

by Timothy J. Muise

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Jack Nicholson screams at Tom Cruise, fully believing that Mr. Cruise's character cannot comprehend the truths of guarding against a very real threat. Hollywood packages the message in shiny emotional bunting, and the script fills the seats of movie theaters. This scene resonates with me, not like it does for veterans or movie buffs, but because I seeth with the conviction that the public could not "handle the truth" about the failures of the prison system here in the Commonwealth. I shed burning tears from the death of prison reform here in Massachusetts. A very real threat.

Prison reform is a taboo term in many diverse circles. Republican zealots will label you soft on crime if you dare utter the words. Moderates want you to call it "public safety protection". Abolitionists cringe when they hear the term as they feel you cannot reform a corpse. There can be no holocaust reform. I tend to be someone who knows the current system is broken, but I also feel that if the public knew the truth, on a widespread scale, there is a possibility we could breathe life into the corpse. My life has to be about possibilities. The fact is that until we unite, put aside personal agendas and accept the truth, we will see more murders in the Mattapan corridor, more spousal abuse in the households, continued drug use among youth, and an ever escalating "law enforcement industrial complex" which is draining our cities and towns of the revenues they need to improve quality of life services. The cart is before the horse as far as the priority scale is concerned here in taxachusetts. Nero fiddles with Rome burning.

We have taken a class of person, the errant, and decided to make him or her the scapegoat for all social decline. The great societies have all jumped off this same cliff, but dashed upon the rocks of their folly we ignore the lament of their corpses. The modern day totalitarianists see the prisoner/criminal/errant as the new goat to scape. The answer must be more prisons. more cops, more guards, or more jackbooted stormtroopers who will drag the perpetrator through the public square behind a clydesdale of oppression. Surely no one can believe this is the answer. Their choice of the errant is an ingenious plan. It does not carry with it blatant tones of racism, sexism, classism, or seperatism. They spin the "bad people go to prison" argument well, seeking longer prison terms, more restrictive gulags, and of course the need for more guards/police/politicians. Blame the errant and crush them under your heel. How's this been working?

We have between 11,000 and 12,000 state prisoners in Massachusetts. About 95% of them will someday, sooner or later, be returning to society. Do we want them angry and unprepared, which is what the more guards/less rehabilitation philosophy creates, or do we want them instilled with real hope and armed with true job skills? The fact is that if we cut the staffing budget for the prisons by 25%, and reinvested that into real job training and work release experience for the incarcerated, in short time, maybe less than a decade. we would see a real reduction in the recidivism rates, crime rates, and juvenile drug use. The current staff to prisoner ratio in Massachusetts is about 1 employee for every 2.2 prisoners. Compare this to Florida (1 to 12) & Alabama (1 to 15) and you will see just how the prison/law enforcement industrial complex has a

firm grip on the state of Massachusetts, with profoundly failed results. Our recidivism rate hovers at 45-50% for years, Crime rates are long stabilized and sadly accepted, and murder rates and youth drug use are on the increase again. We must make a change.

We must begin this process with a new regime being installed in the corrections department. A clean sweep of the upper level administrators must be conducted. The next move is to take 250 million (half of the recent bond signed by the legislature to build "new" high security prisons) and invest it into job skill training/work release housing for prisoners within five (5) years of their release date. The other half of that bond money should be directed to Big Brother and Big Sister programs which will stem the tide of new errants much more effectively than more guards and cops ever will. The final segment of a comprehensive plan would have to involve cutting corrections staffing levels by 50%. This would ensure sustainability. Lower security facilities require much lower staffing levels. We have allowed a far too powerful guards union paint a truly false and counter-productive picture that we need more higher security prisons. This self-serving propaganda has gotten us into the mess we are in. We need to convert two of the medium security prisons into work release facilities, with part of the jobs being run out of those facilities being work for the state of Massachusetts itself, fixing roads, bridges and public parks. Teach a man to fish and he will eat forever! We need to use the prisoner.

The time has come to find the right people to shout the need for real reform from the rooftops. These strong-willed, strong voiced, and level headed individuals are out there, we just need to flush them out. Let's start by having the current reform/public safety/abolitionist workers publicize a cry for help. The battle needs to be fought, at first, in the court of public opinion and sensationalism. Occupy events, state house rallies, building occupations, & student demonstrations all need to be part of the first phase. The grounds outside of the Shirley, Massachusetts prison complex, a real hate-factory and future murder breeding ground, needs to be occupied. The media will cover it and the message can effectively be sent over the airways. We will have to name names of abusers who have been convicted, give salaries of layabout DOC employees & cite the loud statistics of failure that we have at our fingertips. The journey of a thousand miles starts with one step. Let's take that step and occupy the public land around the Shirley Complex. We need you to get involved!

My hopes are that this new movement will help wipe away the acid tears wept upon the grave of prison reform, while resurrecting the spirit it will require to move our society forward. Will you lay dormant while our children shoot each other? Will you watch TV while young teens try their first bag of heroin? Will YOU allow greedy politicians and unreasonable civic leaders to disrespect the hallowed ground so many have died to protect? What will it take to get you off the couch, out of the casino, off the golf course, and out onto the public lands of Shirley, Massachusetts? Let's hope it will not have to be the death of someone close. Let's hope it is this rallying call. Let's show the world we "CAN handle the truth"!

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