

March 1, 2013

Hello World!

Good mental health. It is a blessing. A not too sympathetic saying around here is: "I'm glad I'm not inside your head." Having spent 27 years in level IV and III, I was not subjected to such a high population of inmates who are in such poor mental health. This prison, Valley State Prison, is a level II where short term inmates serving 1-5 years were originally housed. With the realignment, level II prisons are now housing a combination of short and long term inmates (lifers like me).

The majority of short term inmates are repeat offenders: drug abusers, thieves, check forgers, etc. Within this group are found what I call, "Head bangers." They repeatedly do the same thing expecting a different outcome. Some call them crazy.

Having closely observed two such inmates housed in my 8-man pod, their condition makes me sad. In their conversations they strenuously state their desire to "make it" this time when released. However, their habits, their inability to grasp the concept of following the rules dooms them. When I gently ask about this contradiction, they see none. Their usual answer is, "I have to do what I have to do." Their answer is not out of stubbornness but a failure in logic. It is not out of an addiction, although that

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is one result of their affliction.

In addition, if the man does not recognize his abnormal mental state, he will not seek mental health care. If diagnosed, and treatment entails taking medication, the prison ensures the inmate takes it. On their release, and being at the bottom of the social and economic ladder, they stop taking the medication and relapse into this over-burdened system. It is the classic revolving door. However, I don't believe anyone is to blame. To be blunt, if a man's brain is broken, and he commits a crime, is he to blame? Yes and no. He committed the act and he must be prevented from future such acts. The question is: should he be punished in the traditional penological sense? I won't get into the legal nuances of insanity and the knowledge of right and wrong. That is beyond this brief conversation.

My point is I have in a short period of time gained an appreciation for my good mental health. It is true that I have made very poor choices in the distant past, but never the same one twice. I do not bang my head. I now also better understand the frustration of the mentally ill. Their cries of "Why is this happening?" will only be met with tenderness and empathy by me. The

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practicalities of treating the mentally ill I will leave to the professionals who are understaffed and their resources are grossly limited.
Thanks for checking in on me.

Cordially,

Gregory Barnes Watson

Gregory Barnes Watson
VSP D-67547 B3-15-2U
PO Box 92
Chowchilla CA 93610

Novel: A Thundering Wind
Journal: A Year in a Life Sentence
(Amazon.com)