

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

BRINGING PRISONERS INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

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Unlike Wisconsin, some states want their prisoners to stay connected to their families while incarcerated as a means of reducing recidivism. Ohio, Louisiana, Virginia, Michigan, North Dakota, Washington and Georgia all allow their prisoners to have access to email. Ohio was the most recent state to adopt policies that allow prisoners to email by using a mini-tablet. These mini-tablets sell for \$49.95 and can also be used for listening to music, playing games and educational activities. I would speculate that they could also be used for word processing and, if so, could replace typewriters in prisons.

Of course, any time a progressive correctional official wants to do something positive for prisoners there's always someone around to object and the news media is sure to seek out that naysayer to generate some controversy. Kristy Dyroff of the National Organization for Victim Assistance is afraid it could result in the revictimization or intimidation of victims. I don't see how. Even if a prisoner emailed a victim of his crime, all that person has to do is not open the email. We currently have telephone access and postal mail which could be used for the same purpose. Email would give us another option for contacting our families and friends - at a much reduced cost. Stamps currently cost 46¢ while a 20 minute phone call from a Wisconsin prison runs from \$2.40 to \$3.60.

Email access for prisoners would make it easier for prisoners to stay in contact because, unlike prisoners who have endless hours of idle time, free-world people have very little free time. Sending an email is a quick, easy way to send a message. Sending an old-fashioned letter is time consuming. Many young people grew up without ever sending or receiving postal letters and the only way they know how to reach out is by electronic communication.

The majority of people in prison are not criminals. They may have violated a law and were sent to prison but they are essentially decent human beings. There are exceptions, of course. Some mentally ill prisoners are unpredictable and there's no telling what they'll do. There are also dedicated gang-bangers, unreformed sex offenders and some who are pure evil. But these are a minority and easily identifiable by their attitudes and actions.

I cannot speak about other states, but in Wisconsin over the last 25 years the department of corrections has been steadily becoming more oppressive and regressive. Crime and imprisonment has been repeatedly used as a political tool to get Republicans elected. Being tough on crime means punishing those who are already in prison. We once had rational and progressive personal property rules, relaxed prison environments and a parole system that actually granted paroles. Now, we face a byzantine system of petty rules, needless restrictions and decades of warehousing. I can see no end to the madness while Scott Walker is governor.

Proponents of email access for prisoners emphasize the need for prisoners to stay connected to family and friends which will reduce recidivism. I think they highlight this reason so they can generate support from the general public.

But there is a more important reason to allow prisoners access to email: it is the right thing to do. Prisoners are often locked away for decades under austere conditions. They are dehumanized, isolated and treated with disdain. Some men go months or years without a kind word from another human being. With email, perhaps they can reach out to the loved ones they left behind or meet new people who will give them the empathy and compassion that is their right as human beings.

It's time to end the status quo. It's time to take a stand and say no to further dehumanization of millions of our citizens. It's time to follow the Lord's command when He told us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Let our prisons become gardens of love and healing where we can grow loving human beings rather than factories of destruction where we manufacture monsters.