

WHAT WASTE AND WITHERS THERE

*The vilest deeds like poison-weeds
Bloom well in prison air;
It is only what is good in Man
That wastes and withers there:
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate
And the Warder is Despair.
-Oscar Wilde*

Metaphors abound describing the prison experience, as nineteenth-century English prisoner Oscar Wilde compares vile deeds with poison-weeds. Twenty-first century prison has evolved to a more "humane" system where fewer bones are broken with an emphasis on broken spirits, however the deeds are just as vile and poison-weeds are in full bloom. As an old man in prison I can appreciate garden metaphors with fond memories of my flower gardens with colorful and fragrant annual and perennial flowers displaying beautiful florid messages: pansies for memory with purple royal hues, red roses representative of lovers' promises, yellow roses emblematic of faithful friends and white blooms epitomizing purity. Flowers express our joy, love, proposals, promises and grief. Shakespeare's Juliet said "A rose is still a rose by any other name." There are no flowers in prison; a prison is still a prison by any other name.

Flowers are actually discouraged in prison where seeds of desperation take root in a garden of odious crops methodically attended by misguided cultivators who prune, cut, trim and pinch back any virtuous buds; simultaneously keeping their garden free of the weeds of Dignity, Pride and Self-esteem. The prison garden path boasts its own color hues of concrete and steel gray, bright red lines delineating areas prisoners can not go and pretty yellow letters sharing the message NO WARNING SHOTS FIRED! Green clad state myrmidons patrol and cultivate.

Where flowers don't grow prejudice and hate flourishes as the primary crop. Guards eagerly enforce the prisoner-guard power differential ignoring, or ignorant of, tenets held in psychological conditioning that punishment should be associated with an act not the punisher. As in Oscar Wilde's time the loss of a man's freedom doesn't seem to be enough punishment, so the practice of oppression is perfected with the cultivators' relentless condescension, sanctimony and schadenfreude. In polarity to the cultivators' self-righteousness, prisoners practice their own form of prejudice despising opposite races, other's offenses, predation of the vulnerable and conformity out of fear. Gangs blossom where the weak minded seek safety in numbers, yet slip deeper into the abyss of prejudice. Twisted constructs cause prisoners to turn on each other like laboratory rats buttressing the argument for hateful polarization.

In this perverse penological garden flowers of mankind wither on the vine of justice where bad become worse and good become bad. Under the Parole Board Tree lies fruit rotting that could have served a worthwhile social service. The sad reality is behind the garden wall of "rehabilitation" prisoners are considered little more than social compost.

However no one can deny orchids can be found among weeds, a rose can be found in the desert and wheat can be thrown out with the chaff. Within this ill attended social garden the cultivators and society only see weeds, although I can see flowers of mankind like trees that society can't see beyond the forest of prejudice.

A prison yard is charged with testosterone both guards and prisoners strut with bravado, and where prison gutter rhetoric reigns supreme, a few young men on the prison yard daily read and discuss Shakespeare with me. The same men sincerely try to model the paradigm of Aristotle's Man of Virture. These young men along with others are unnoticed roses in this netherworld desert of intolerance. These men are flowers of humanity that refuse to subscribe to the canons of hate and prejudice, buds and sprouts of virtue the cultivators can't cut back, or the weeds choke out.

When a young prisoner comes to me eager to discuss the tenets of critical thinking and precepts to follow for a better and wholesome life, I can see light sparkling in this darkness. Still, glints of virtue aren't confined to young prisoners thirsting for knowledge and greater insight. While walking across the prison yard one day, I was approached by Edward Harden a 60 year old black man who's eye sight is failing fast from glaucoma, his right eye has withered and must be removed while his left eye is close behind. Having passed through the gates into this poison-weed garden at the tender age of 18, with a sentence of 7 years-to-life, for 41 years Edward has been known as prisoner B-48621, I know him as an honorable man and truly a Phoenix that has risen from the ashes of a burnt out youth. Edward had just recently been denied parole for the 19th time, emotionally crushed by the ruthless denial, he asked if I could help him. I explained my help would be little more than the blind leading the blind, however my heart felt sympathy went out to him.

Edward's story begins like many others who found themselves planted in the loam of so called "rehabilitation" while their roots had already been established in the dirt of hate. The fiendish social canker of prejudice brought Edward and his crime partner to murder most foul. Edward was an 18 year old child/man, with a hate infested mind, doomed to be a forgotten soul. Edward soon found, like most prisoners, outside contacts and support systems crumble like autumn leaves rendering them abandoned by society. His six siblings dropped him like a hot rock and distant family quickly forgot him. Dante's "Inferno" best describes the entrance to this synthetic hell "All hope abandon, ye who enter here." With no positive role model and taught since a child to hate white people Edward found acceptance, although malignant, in the prison gang known as the Black Gorilla Family. Young and impressionable driven by immaturity's will to conform Edward obediently followed orders to sell drugs, fight and hate. His prison recalcitrance of twenty years, with write up after write up, caused him to slip deeper into the abyss.

Edward's life began its turn one day over twenty years ago, feeling emotionally empty and at an ebb of self-worth, he responded to a christian magazine pen-pal advertisement introducing Doris to his downward spiraling life. Through their many letters Doris brought an alien concept to Edward's life -unconditional love. For the first time in his life he found that he didn't have to hurt, steal, exploit, or hate, to find an unexplainable inner serenity. Where a multi-billion dollar punishment-"rehabilitation" industry failed, unconditional love began to move Edward to open his eyes and heart to others.

However, Edward was still reluctant to let go of his life-long tenets of hate and prejudice with senseless dedication to the prison gang. Two years passed as his bond with Doris grew stronger. Edward's spiritual and intellectual growth was ready to go to the next level, he was a virtuous bud about to blossom out to a beautiful flower of mankind. Charles Cottier an officer among guards brought Edward to his next level of intellectual growth and epiphany. Cottier convinced Edward to look inward to himself and see the malignancy that lingers within from the diseased soul of a prison-gang.

In 1989 Edward formally denounced his gang membership and was branded as a "rat" by the ignorant herd he ran with. Subsequently he was moved to a prison where gang members would not have access for their revenge. In the new prison environment he became more devoted to his christian faith, intellectual

growth, Doris's guidance and the demons of his guilt making him conscious of the loss and pain his blinded prejudice caused. His insight brought him to a state of remorse and self-inflicted psychological punishment the meanest prison could not manage.

Changing a life dedicated to crime and hatred is not an easy task, Edward joined self-help groups, obtained his high school equivalent GED, expressed his genuine remorse to his victims and became a self-help class facilitator helping prisoners who also want to improve themselves. On the path of his moral metamorphosis Edward hit bumps and received minor write-ups, he would go before the parole board and the board would deny him liberty on an average of 3 years at a time. However where many men would become bitter Edward stayed true to his course of becoming a virtuous man.

Year after year glaucoma robbed more of his eye sight completely stealing his right eye, he stopped receiving prison write-ups indicating a model prisoner, his bond with Doris grew stronger and certificates piled up from his participation in self-help groups and courses. However, the parole board continued to deny his liberty, as if deliberately crushing any hope of being a worthwhile contributor to society.

At Edward's last appearance before the parole tribunal two psychologists' evaluations determined Edward was the lowest risk of violence to society. He had received no write-ups and provided a worthy re-assimilation plan. Yet, this 3/4 blind old man sitting before the inquisition was denied once again for three years saying "You lack insight".

In the last 41 yrs Edward has demonstrated himself as a paragon of change defying all odds turning his life around 180 degrees. Common sense, confirmed by two psychologists, says Edward is fruit ready to be harvested. It must be understood, Edward is not unique to this perverse cat and mouse game the parole board plays with men's lives and tax dollars. By CDCR's statistics it costs the State of California \$138,000.00 a year to incarcerate a prisoner over the age of 55 years, the U.S. Supreme Court has found California's prisons are violating the constitutional rights of prisoners with obsessed prison overcrowding and it is axiomatic the longer a prisoner is kept in prison the more difficult it is for the prisoner to re-assimilate. So, the question has to be asked "Who is really lacking insight?"

In the truest sense of hypocrisy, on the basis of "lack of insight", the parole board denies prisoners' their liberty, when in fact lack of insight is well implanted in California's punishment driven system. "Evil deeds like poison-weeds bloom well in prison air" What proper gardener would intentionally allow fruit to rot on the vine, or encourage flowers to turn to seed? The third largest draw on California's budget is the poison-weed garden of prisons. The federal court has determined California's prison system is dysfunctional, but rather than use insight and look inward California's guardians of the public trust spend multi-millions of dollars to defend and rationalize a truly shameful garden.

Taxpayers have to ask "How does our garden grow?" The federal court has ordered reduction of the prison population, however Governor Brown and his Secretary of Corrections, Jeffery Beard, say with audacity, "There isn't a prisoner currently in our prisons that would be safe to release!" Where is their "insight"? Where is the threat of blind old Edward Harden? California's prisons are punishing old harmless men to death; what kind of threat is an old man requiring a walker to walk the prison yard? To who's benefit is it to let fruit rot on the vine? There are both young and old men, along with billions of tax dollars, that waste and wither there!

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