

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...

When I first started writing for this project I intended to share thoughts and ideas that would be meaningful, or at least interesting. I thought that I could also share occasional anecdotes regarding life behind these walls as well, yet mostly those of a humorous bent. There is enough bad news in the world, and who wants to hear more, especially regarding occurrences happening to a not very sympathetic lot of characters?

I'm reminded of the late comedian, Lenny Bruce. After one legal defeat was followed by another, and yet another, in his battle against censorship, and he discovered that "free speech" can be extremely limited, his stand-up routine became mostly a long, bitter rant against injustices he'd suffered. And as important as it is to bring awareness to such abuses of power as he'd experienced with the courts, his comedy suffered from it. The venue wasn't one where people wanted to be made aware of them.

However, in my own case, circumstances trumped my original intent. As always happens whenever one group of people is given authority over another group, and where there are no significant checks and balances instituted to prevent abuse - and often even when there are - abuses started occurring on a regular basis all around me. I began seeing a culture of incessant

(2)

cruelty where prison staff routinely violated the rights of prisoners - especially the mentally-ill and those not possessing the intellectual ability to either understand what was at play and thus seek an appropriate remedy, or to refrain from acting out emotionally and thus granting a twisted justification for staff's actions against them.

One thing you learn fast in prison:

MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS.

Most of the time when something bad happens to an inmate, it is possible to see how they may have brought it upon themselves; although it is never a valid justification for staff abuse of power, it's not terribly difficult to see it as a case of a person falling into a pit they dug themselves. But what do you do when you see blatant mistreatment resulting in serious injury, and no one else is doing anything about it? And you see that saying nothing is probably leading to such incidents increasing in both frequency and severity?

*The sage Hillel said that if you find yourself in a place where there are no men, strive to be a man. *

There are many different conceptions of what it means to be a man. I learned from my father an ideal of manhood that has been prominent in American, and indeed much of Western Culture for a very long time. It included the Anglo-Saxon mandate of keeping a stiff upper lip at all times, and it frowned on most displays of emotion. Being a man meant being rugged; and lest you forget this in moments of discomfort or pain, you received the adage:

Don't cry, or I'll give you something to cry about.

Complaint was intolerable, and anything that resembled whining was an invitation to scorn and/or physical punishment. Usually the latter was much preferable to the former.

There were notions of honesty, that a man must stand by his word. And fair-play, because a man doesn't cheat, because he doesn't want anything that he hasn't won honorably.

There was also a sense of decency - taught, like the rest, in word if not always in deed - that despised bullying or picking on the vulnerable. Women and children, the elderly, the disabled: all were to be protected, and not just physically. Their honor was to be guarded. Their dignity was to be maintained.

(4)

I was taught to stand up for the weak, even if I were not much stronger. But there was a catch: Only physical weakness entitled another to championship. Weakness of character, cowardice, baseness - these were a person's faults, and he had to bear the consequences of them on his own. You never fought for someone who refused to fight for themselves, or who displayed character so low as to evoke loathing.

I believe that Hillel's maxim includes all of the good in the above while going further. It isn't enough to be a man; one must also strive to be a Mensch.

And there is no sense of "when in Rome do as the Romans do." No matter if the whole surrounding world is remiss, and despite any general sense that matters do not concern you, its no excuse. You are always responsible; it does concern you. If you notice a problem then you need to make it your problem.

There is a saying that tells us that even one who lives on charity has an obligation to give charity to others. I believe this instills in a person the fact that no matter our level of need there is always someone in more need. Despite whatever vulnerabilities I may face, it doesn't excuse me from addressing the vulnerabilities of others.

It isn't a matter of doing anyone favors; it's nothing less than obligation. Choice or preference shouldn't ever factor in to the equation. And so I took what steps I could. I wrote letters for inmates, I helped them file grievance forms, assisted them in documenting abuses and contacting any and every possible advocate or potential source of assistance. Many times all I could do was bear witness. I wrote blog entries detailing the incidences of abuse.

However, prison staff were on to me. They wouldn't tolerate such information getting out anymore. Few of the many blog entries that I mailed made it out of the prison. On a few occasions prison staff entered my cell, showed me the mail I had attempted to send out, tore it up in front of me, and then took steps to teach me that I should not attempt sending such things out again. I'm stiff-necked. I kept at it. Staff turned up the heat.

My Father's Day story was "lost." My piece on Strategies Against Mass Incarceration was "misplaced." My Blog For Human Rights Day ended up as confetti on my cell floor as did I, courtesy of Central Prison staff. All in all, from June 2012 through September 2013, several dozen blogs I mailed never made it out of the prison. On average one out of every two dozen pieces of mail that I submitted to staff for posting actually made it out of the prison.

Then, in 2013, a class action lawsuit against Central Prison staff, including the Warden of the prison, was filed in federal court. It was brought on behalf of eight prison inmates by North Carolina Prisoner Legal Services, Inc. Please refer [redacted] to two newspaper articles written by Associated Press reporter Michael Biesecker that appeared in the Raleigh News & Observer in May of 2013.

"Lawsuit: 8 inmates beaten at N.C.'s Central Prison"
and

"Central Prison Warden promoted to regional job."

These articles give details of just some of the "systematic beatings of handcuffed and shackled inmates held in solitary confinement." The eight inmates referred to are just a few of the lucky-unlucky ones who were able to, against all odds, interest someone on the outside in a position to try to help. Many other inmates have suffered similar or even worse abuse but were not able to get their cries heard. Whenever I was able I tried to help them air their grievances. Only on those occasions when the staff involved are so arrogant or ignorant that they don't even attempt to cover up their crimes does an abused inmate stand a chance of having his or her complaint even considered.

(7)

I'm glad that I was able to help some of them, but retaliation from staff reached a fever pitch. After a couple of hunger strikes - not my first - and with the help of a fantastic and sympathetic doctor, Dr. G., along with threats of a lawsuit and the airing of more of the prison's dirty laundry, I was able to receive a transfer and promotion in custody level that has taken me away from the worst of the abuse, KA'H. There have been a few minor incidents, and one that could have been a major set-back, instigated by the same former Warden mentioned in the above news articles. But thankfully they were resolved.

Since then I've been able to test the waters to see if I can utilize my right to free expression without adverse consequences, and am happy to report that I seem to be able to. I plan on eventually writing short pieces detailing some of the worst abuses, and when able will provide documentation to substantiate them. Some light has been shed on a few of the things that occur - with chilling frequency - inside this system. It hasn't stopped all of the abuses. Not even most of them; but it's a start. There is an obligation to document what has been witnessed and

experienced.

I also hope to post some things about my case as so many people have asked me to do so. I've been asked to tell the story, and while I do not expect many outside of my circle of loved ones to be interested, perhaps I'll be surprised. I look forward to writing more and, if I'm lucky, contributing something worth your time reading.

"The capacity to be puzzled is indeed the premise of all creation, be it in art or in science."

-Erich Fromm

All the best,

In Solidarity,

Malcolm

Malcolm Yisrael Azaria

#0573716