

2 WRONGS DON'T MAKE A RIGHT

Sunday

April 17, 2016

I just finished watching an episode of 60 Minutes. Tonight's lead story was about the corruption and abuse rampant in the correctional system, specifically, at Ryker's Island, in New York City, New York, as illustrated by a lawsuit which had been recently filed. What made this lawsuit so unusual to me wasn't the facts of the individual case, which I'll get into in a moment, but the fact that the (U.S.? New York?) Attorney General's Office was involved because, more often than not, anyone associated with law enforcement ignores our pleas when we try to bring matters like this to their attention.

The facts of this case are relatively straightforward, and all too common. A man with mental health issues was arrested for some sort of probation or parole violation, and while in custody, he started acting bizarrely. In this particular instance, he was dancing around the dayroom, during which time he'd taken off his shirt and twisted it into a phallic symbol. The response of correctional officers was swift, and predictable. He was placed in handcuffs and led away to an isolation cell. With nothing to occupy his mind but his thoughts, his mental health, poor to begin with, quickly deteriorated even further. When his pleas for help went unanswered, he began to act out, flushing his toilet and flooding the hallway outside of his cell. Once again, the administration's response was swift and predictable, and his water was turned off. With no way to flush his toilet, he continued his descent. The smell, as you can imagine, was horrendous, but rather than turning on the water, even momentarily, for him to flush his toilet, or providing him with an opportunity to take a shower, they left him there, laying in his own feces. Their only acknowledgment of what he was going through was to bring in some aerosol cans of air freshener from home to try to mask the smell. After almost a week, he was removed, not by correctional staff, but fellow inmates under the supervision of correctional staff, where he died a few days later from complications related to what he'd just been subjected to. In all, he'd spent approximately 6 days in solitary confinement.

For those of you who haven't personally experienced solitary confinement in prison, trust me when I tell you that there are some things that simply can't be described. You have to experience it, and not just for an hour or two, but for several days. Once you've done so, you'll see why those of us in the know refer to it as the "hole" or the "dungeon." It is, without a doubt, a torture far worse than almost anything else that man's devised, capable of inflicting permanent emotional damage on its victim, while at the same time, leaving no visible damages which could be used as evidence in a court of law.

Solitary confinement may be somewhat of a misnomer, though, as technically, you aren't alone. You're in a cell by yourself, but you're surrounded on all sides by other guys in the same situation as you, and because they've been there longer than you have, you can rest assured that they've progressed even farther down the rabbit hole than you. We use the term solitary confinement to describe what we're going through because, while there, we're completely cut off from everything. You have no radio, no TV, not even a book to read. There's no one to talk to, unless you get on your knees and shout underneath your door to the guy(s) down the hall. The end result is a cacophony that reverberates off the concrete walls, all day and all night, every day and night. It drills into your skull, overwhelming you and driving you deeper and deeper into the pits of hell, and there's not a damn thing you can do about it. I've never known anyone subjected to such conditions who didn't see internal changes, for the worst, even though most refuse to acknowledge them.

As far as this particular story's concerned, once it became clear that there was going to be repercussions for their actions, or rather, their inactions, the guards started doing what they do best, which is to say that everyone blamed everyone else, but in such a way that provided no one with the ammunition needed to hold any one person responsible. In other words, the guards working the floor blamed their immediate supervisors for making the decisions that were made, and the supervisors blamed the guards for not having provided them with enough information to make a better decision. It's a story that goes back to the first lawsuit ever filed against a correctional officer, and one that holds up in court on almost any given day of the week.

What I don't understand is why we continue to allow people to use this as an excuse. When you're an officer, whether a correctional officer or a police officer, you have a responsibility to see to it that the law's followed. As a police officer, this means that when you partner is beating a confession from a suspect, you've got a responsibility to not only stop it, but also to report it, and as a correctional officer, when your supervisor is making a bad decision, one that's leading to the harm of another, you've got a responsibility to take it to his supervisor, even if the harm that's being caused is to an inmate. And if, or more likely, when, that person doesn't listen, then you've got a responsibility to take it up the chain of command until someone does listen. This is what it means to be an officer of the law, be it police or correctional, and if you can't do that, then you've got no business working in the field of law enforcement.

Sadly, mistreatment of inmates in here is the rule, not the exception. We're taken advantage of in more ways than you can possibly imagine, whether it's done by the guards themselves or by fellow inmates, at the direction of the guards. Inmates are beaten, stolen from, threatened, lied to, sexually harassed, raped, etc., but what makes it all worse is that when we complain, the people who are supposed to investigate our complaints work in concert to screen those complaints out, or cover them up if they can't be screened out.

In case you're wondering, screening out a complaint means pointing to some relatively minor flaw in the way you've prepared your complaint, whether a legitimate flaw or one that was made up, and using it to stop the complaint from even being accepted. It's used to reject the vast majority of complaints, and on many occasions, it's followed up with even more abuse, done to stop any further attempts to seek justice for what was done. And trust me when I tell you these people can be quite creative when it comes to screening out, or rejecting, complaints.

At the end of the day, we're all here because we were accused of doing something wrong, but that doesn't mean we should be mistreated while we're here. As my grandmother used to say, "two wrongs don't make a right," and that's no less true today than it was then. Although I should probably point out that, while two wrongs don't make a right, 2 Wrights do make an airplane. That, and as any NASCAR fan knows, 3 left-hand turns make a right.

Incidentally, did anyone happen to notice the slogan underneath the sign at Ryker's Island? "Home of New York's Boldest." is it just me, or is this a Freudian slip? A subliminal message about how correctional officers at Ryker's Island have gotten away with what they've been doing for so long that they can openly brag about their boldness?

Questions, comments or even complaints can be posted here, or sent to me snail mail via the address listed below. Just know that if you post something here, it might be a little while before my reply is posted. It's not because I'm ignoring you, it's because I don't have access to the Internet.

Shawn L. Perrot CDCR# V-42461
MCSP Cell# C-13-229L
P.O. Box 409060
Ione, CA 95640