

THE PATHOLOGY OF REHABILITATION

Peter Collins 0792S3B, April 2014

At the age of twelve I was a chronic runaway. My home life was emotionally distressed, I was unhappy, I felt unsafe and unloved, but running away didn't make things better for me. On the street I was victimized by two male pedophiles, and this solidified my distrust of adults who I viewed as authority figures. At the age of fourteen, I was taken in by an older woman who groomed young boys for sex and I lived with her for a couple of years. Her home was a hive of criminal activity,⁻¹ and this experience pointed me on a collision course with society and the rule of law. At sixteen I was an angry, misguided teenager who was incrementally more and more out of control. At twenty-one, I was arrested and charged with a series of bank robbery related crimes. Before I could be brought to court I escaped and while on the run, during a botched bank robbery, I shot and killed a police officer.

I was convicted of murder, sentenced, and placed in the custody of the Canadian Penitentiary Service (CPS). That is how my life-25⁻² sentence started thirty-one years ago. My sentence was intended to denounce and punish me while deterring others. My incarceration was intended to keep society safe and somewhere in the mix "rehabilitate" me. Police and prison officials were concerned that I would try to escape and had me placed in one of Canada's two federal Special Handling Units⁻³ (SHU).

When I arrived at Millhaven maximum-security prison, the low, sprawling building projected the image of a college. As the transport vehicle got closer it revealed the gun towers and the tall perimeter fences which were electrified and covered in razor wire. The entrance gates opened and I was swallowed up; stripped of my clothes,

1
The friends and associates that frequented her house included prison escapees, bank robbers, bikers, parole violators, drug dealers, and she was a sex worker, a fraud artist, and highly skilled shoplifter.

2
"Life-25" is a sentence of Life without eligibility for parole before twenty-five years have been served.

3
Special Handling Unit (SHU) is Canada's highest security prison.

assigned a number and locked in a cell. My initial SHU placement was an iron box, complete with iron walls, ceiling, bed and desk, all welded into the other with two sheets of steel covering the cell window. The staggered steel coverings over the window had half inch holes punched into them but were off-set to allow me to look outside with one eye at a time and only if I held my head off at an angle. These "windows" provided no sunlight and no fresh air and have no business being referred to as windows. The heavy metal door opened and closed electrically with a grinding, whirring smash. Through the layers of metal and concrete I could hear the metallic echoes seamlessly embraced by angry yelling, pleading sobs and the tormented screams of the discarded and forgotten.

The Rules

In prison there are endless reams of official policies, rules, directives, regulations and laws that need to be followed; paradoxically, Canadian prisoners have high rates of illiteracy and mental health issues. Regardless of ability prisoners are expected to know and follow the thousands upon thousands of complicated rules and regulations, which are applied unevenly and often capriciously.

There are also unwritten rules that officials arbitrarily impose, but the main rule is NEVER complain. Prison administrators expect a level of compliant subservience; a "good inmate" is quiet and willingly malleable to any official's whim, at any time. While this official expectation assists in the short-term goal of the day-to-day running of the prison system, it has no benefit to helping prisoners become more responsible and accountable.

Prisoners also impose rules on themselves. The main rules are "don't get involved in other prisoners' affairs," "don't look into other prisoner's cells," "don't

take another prisoner's property," "don't inform on other prisoner's," and "don't gossip." All of the rules are regularly broken by both prisoners and guards, and both groups appear equally willing to turn a blind eye to most anything if it benefits them in some way.

Personal Change

In the early years of my incarceration I took no responsibility for my conduct or my crime. The process of being caught, convicted, and sentenced only strengthened my belief that I was the victim. I was still nurturing my victimhood from childhood traumas and my attitude was generally defensive, disrespectful, and confrontational.

While I was in the SHU, a significant friendship developed through correspondence. Our letters were epic tomes, hundreds and hundreds of pages passed back and forth every week for many years. We investigated ideas, challenged and questioned each other and she helped me widen my perspective and I came to realize how flawed my outlook and attitude was. Through this relationship (and others since) I learned that compassion, respect, friendship and love are the only keys to influencing positive change in people. Had her kind and thoughtful influence not occurred, my view of the world and my role in it would have been reinforced by the prison system and I would have tried to escape again. Had I not been killed trying to escape, I would have been responsible for more tragedy. As a result of her patience, kindness and insight I was finally able to see that it was me that was in the wrong and who needed to change. For the first time in my young life I was able to see that I was part of the human family called society and I was the problem. I realized I was no longer the victim but had become the victimizer.

Faced with the realization that I wasn't separate from society but actually a part of it I strained to change my path and be useful and do some good. When I was released

from the SHU in 1987 I was having a discussion about how screwed up the prison system is. The barbershop supervisor (Bill Moore) was incensed at my critical comments and told me it made him sick how guys commit crimes and when they end up in prison become social advocates. I asked him if the point of prison wasn't to help us take a more positive social attitude, then "what was the point?" He commented that it seemed I had a lot of criticism but offered no solutions. I realized that he made a good point. I didn't want to be one of those people that complain but have no solutions or constructive suggestions to contribute. I began to think about these social justice issues more deeply. I got a job in the prison library and I read as many articles, reports, and books on social issues, problems, and opinions as I could find.

I worked at upgrading my grade-eight education and earned my high school equivalency. I started and completed a first-year political science course with Queens University. In 1992, I began an Arts program and earned a Graphic, Commercial and Fine Arts Honours Diploma, a program which was initially discouraged by prison officials. The more I learned and understood, the more I wanted to try to solve systemic problems and corruption. I saw how people were being mistreated and mistreating each other in the prison system and it disturbed me. The conditions of our collective imprisonment combined with my social awakening had the effect of politicizing me.

In prison I found what I felt was a useful social purpose, trying to improve things. I began to bring problems in the prison system to officials inside and out of prison. I wrote to parliamentarians and non-governmental social justice organizations and law societies and university criminology departments. I submitted articles to magazines and newspapers. I regularly contributed to community radio shows in an effort to raise awareness about issues in the prison system. My efforts to address systemic problems in the prison system, such as parole,

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case management, health care, HIV/AIDS, racism, violence, homophobia, corruption, abuse, and official bullying has resulted in the development of strong relationships with community organizations and people involved in the social justice aspect of the prison system.

On the other hand, my efforts to advocate for positive change to the current justice and prison system has resulted in me being labelled an administrative nuisance, anti-authority and a trouble-maker. While I have not been convicted of any offences in around twenty years the parole board, in their most recent decision, state they want to see a period of time in which I can demonstrate that I can follow the rules before I can be paroled. Silence, it seems, equals "rehabilitated" in Canada's prison system and this explains why so many prisoners withdraw emotionally and try to mimic doormats.

The Prison System

On a political level justice and prison is working well—it is a constant source of distraction from pressing social problems like poverty, racism, sexism, classism, the war on drugs, disproportionate wealth, corporate exploitation & crimes and environmental catastrophe. Instead of finding and working towards real solutions prisoners are tied to the whipping post. A villain to point at, to feel better than, to fill the role of "the other," the enemy. That we are sisters, mothers, brothers, fathers, and people's children doesn't strike a chord with the distracted masses. Prison is "the stick," "the carrot" is relative comfort as people work paycheck-to-paycheck to cover the monthly credit bills on the car, house, TV, and couch. Meanwhile, disenfranchised, over-policed, racialized, and impoverished communities are routed for their young men and women, who fill the prison cells. Its true the prison system gets out of control from time to time, and things (prisoners) are difficult

to manage, but for the most part the machine is working well... like clockwork... it's just a matter of time.

In the 1980s the Canadian Penitentiary Service (CPS) morphed into the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) in what was a strategic re-branding effort. The CPS had just come through a decade of violent upheavals, "riots, strikes, murders, and hostage-takings that grew in numbers and size with each passing year. By 1976 the prison explosions were almost constant; hardly a week passed without another violent incident."⁴ The country's population was increasingly uncomfortable with the stories of violence and mistreatment in the prisons. The government took the cue (it was time for a little distraction) and was now pushing the concept of "rehabilitation" in the latest instalment of "how to incarcerate" while appearing to be better than they were before and better than those "other,"⁵ less enlightened & abusive foreign prison regimes. Canada added the word "correct" right into the new title of their prison service, as if a label can change the contents of the box. Regardless of Canada's official effort to change (re-brand), prison is still prison and at its heart punitive oppression is what they sell in the correctional misery market—and we prisoners are the commodity.

What is Rehabilitation?

I know what people think "rehabilitation" means, and I know what they claim to do in these prisons. The reality is that prison is categorically incompatible with the dictionary definition of rehabilitation. As if to prove the point, on rare occasions, excerpts from the correctional horror show ooze out from behind the Iron Curtain; like the CSC snuff films, circa 2007, Ashley

Smith. This grotesque film footage shocked the nation (temporarily), and the ensuing Coroner's Inquests, circa 2013, which CSC fought tooth and nail (costing taxpayers millions in CSC legal defence costs, not to mention years in delays) all to prevent video evidence being shown to the public. When all was said and done CSC was found to have engaged in a pattern of long term torture, assault, and abuse, which culminated in homicide (by prison officials) of the mentally distressed teenager. Ashley was pronounced dead at 8:10 am October 19, 2007. The verdict of death by homicide⁶ was handed down six years after her death, on December 19, 2013. Ashley's crime was throwing an apple at a postal worker as a youth. She was transferred to the adult prison system (CSC) and held illegally and tortured in a variety of isolation chambers. Smith's young life ended in the Grand Valley Prison for Women in Ontario. Prison guards stood outside her isolation cell watching and filming her slow, excruciating death. After the fact, in true Eichmannesque fashion, they claimed they were following orders. Their orders, if they are to be believed, were to wait until she had stopped breathing before they "helped her." The word "rehabilitation" rings in my ears when I ponder their conduct.

Unfortunately, Ashley's case is only one of many wherein CSC engages in a battle of wills with prisoners in their custody. The Service appears unable (unwilling?) to differentiate between principled resistance to degrading treatment (or worse) from a strong-willed prisoner (or a prisoner attempting to be strong-willed) and an emotionally distressed and or mentally ill person being held prisoner. Apparently both must be crushed.

The Service constantly engages in "battles of will" or games of "correctional chicken"⁷ with prisoners. There is very little evidence to support the premise that officials have any awareness of the possible harm caused

6
The Verdict of the
Coroner's Jury
from the Office of
the Chief Coroner
of the Province
of Ontario, 26
Grenville St.,
Toronto, Ontario,
M7A 2G9.

7
Chicken is
a contest of
courage, often, if
not usually, played
with cars driving
towards each
other in the same
lane until one of
the contestants
swerves to miss
the impending
collision.

to the prisoner. The CSC sub-culture is rigid and never wrong and considers a change of course to be an admission of error. An admission of error for the CSC is to accept defeat, and CSC can never be wrong. Former Supreme Court Justice, Louise Arbour, referred to this sub-culture in her 1994-1995 Inquiry⁸ into the Kingston Prison for Women. Commissioner Arbour, speaking about the CSC complaint and grievance system, stated: "On the basis of facts revealed by this inquiry, I am satisfied that as a method of dispute resolution, the process has no chance of success unless there is a significant change in the mindset of the Correctional Service towards being prepared to admit error without feeling that it is conceding defeat."

The Kingston Prison for Women (P4W) was closed under the weight of the Arbour Commission inquiry, which had exposed systemic corruption and abuse at the prison. The Canadian government built a series of women's prisons across Canada to correct the pattern of systemic abuses at P4W. The Grand Valley Women's Prison was a shining example of the innovative changes being ushering in. However, name changes like CPS to CSC are distractions that don't address systemic correctional failure.

The "old" attitudes and systems simply migrate to, and populate, the new prisons. As soon as construction was completed on the new women's prisons, CSC began to add high security isolation cells and units. The systemic cycle of excessive segregation and isolation was ramped up. The CSC created a policy titled "The Management Protocol" and this "protocol" was only applied to, and used on, Aboriginal women. The Management Protocol was protested by community groups, and the Office of the Correctional Investigators (OCI) and came under heavy scrutiny and it was eventually abandoned by CSC. However, it should be noted that CSC only jettisoned the name; not the practice. Aboriginal women are still over-represented in Canada's segregation and isolation chambers, and Aboriginal women still spend

more time in administrative and punitive seclusion than their Caucasian counterparts. It is important to acknowledge that “Canada’s incarceration rate is already high when compared internationally,”⁹ and to realize that “we” (Canada) “incarcerate Aboriginal people at a rate that is nine times more than the national average,”¹⁰ and recognize that “among women offenders, the over-representation is even more dramatic—an astounding 33% of the federal women inmate population is Aboriginal,”¹¹ as reported in the 2009-2010 OCI report.

Is this is an example of failed rehabilitation or an extension of the residential school policy and the Canadian government’s effort to crush Aboriginals out of existence by destroying their communities through poverty, neglect, oppression, over-policing, and finally over-incarceration?

Tough on Crime

The conservative default “tough on crime” attitude has added to CSC’s inability to “rehabilitate” and has increased abuse and systemic racism.¹² The CSC’s current position on mental health care issues is just symbolic lip service. The CSC continues to be irrational, non-adaptive, and insensitive to the high needs of prisoners with significant mental health issues. Woe to those prisoners who can’t self-“fix” their mental health condition on command before a screaming guard shoots tear gas into their face as a team of correctional officers swarm them, chain them up and strap them down in multi-point “restraint equipment.”¹³ Prisoners suffering these conditions are regularly left in their own filth for hours and days, neither guard nor prisoner capable of changing their behaviour to meet the other’s limitations.

9 Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2009-2010, 5, para. 4.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 The Corrections & Conditional Release Act had sections added to it that would allow CSC and the National Parole Board to streamline and facilitate conditional releases of Aboriginals. However, since the introduction of those sections to the CCRA the rates of conditional release (parole) and incarceration have increased.

13 Multi-Point “restraint equipment” consists of a variety of different hardware and mechanisms devised to handcuff, shackle someone onto beds, chairs, floors, and walls using harnesses that resemble racecar driving seatbelt harnesses.

Over the fence, out there in over-privileged Canada, in the face of the endless evidence, blind faith and trust is placed in the prison system. The Conservatives willfully turn their backs on social science and they are undeterred by the statistical reality that crime rates have been dropping for decades. They have a pathological desire to put more people in prisons. They pump out new "tough on crime" legislation, which regularly fails to pass constitutional muster in front of provincial and federal courts and the Supreme Court of Canada. Harper & company are undeterred and continue to write and pass "new" Reform Party bills and hastily shove them through in omnibus bills, with no regard to the outcome.

When it comes to putting more and more people into cramped, dirty, violent prisons it is difficult to reconcile any claim of rehabilitation or positive outcomes. As prisoners are squeezed, two at a time, into cells built for one, where they now spend more time, the word rehabilitation is truly a misnomer. The prison I am currently in has increased its population by about 100 and about two-thirds of the prisoners are double-bunked. There are two brand-new prison compounds inside this perimeter that will soon go on line. We are expecting a couple hundred more prisoners. The construction has not included increases to phones, showers, bathrooms, healthcare services or visiting spaces. The recreation yard has been reduced by half, and our library has been made smaller. Unemployment is rampant and prisoner pay levels (established more than thirty years ago, and never indexed for inflation) were recently cut by a third. Over the last thirty years the CSC gradually shifted the purchasing burden of many medical, hygiene, recreational, and program items onto prisoners. So while poverty has always been a serious problem in prison, it is now at a crisis point. Low pay has reduced prisoners' ability to survive prison and reintegrate back into the community safely or effectively.

The prison system appears again to be teetering on the brink of violent upheaval.

Violence in the prison system has been rising since the Harper government has imposed their ill-informed and punitive “tough on crime” agenda. According to the OCI, “In the last five years, the number of self-injury incidents in CSC facilities has more than doubled,”¹⁴ and Aboriginal women prisoners “accounted for 45% of all self-injury incidents.”¹⁵ It is difficult not to see “rehabilitation” as a buzzword that encapsulates a non-existent correctional pursuit that can never be achieved in a cage and is simply not intended to be anything more than a distraction for the masses.

14
Office of the
Correctional
Investigator
Annual Report,
2011-2010, page 8,
para. 2.

15
Ibid.

Implosion, Delusion &. Compliance

Personal change is not something I am saying can't happen in prison; I experienced it and I've seen it in others. I have seen some people become more thoughtful, more considerate, and kind, but most often I have seen people emotionally isolate themselves. A disadvantaged early life complimented by a tour in prison teaches many people that no one can be trusted. The warped social lessons don't just come from predatory or exploitive prisoners they also come from prison administrators and officials who approach prisoners with careless duplicity. In these places where trust is a rare commodity, people's humanity gets shredded.

Over time, prison warps and distorts people to the point they can be rendered unstable, violent and a danger to themselves and others (in prison or out). People who were not dangerous become violent and dangerous, and people who were dangerous before prison have become angrier and more volatile and unpredictable. Prisoners can become so disillusioned and frustrated by their endless incarceration under dehumanizing conditions that they turn inward and

Stockholm Syndrome is a term for the condition identified in the Red October kidnapping of Patty Hearst, who went on to adopt the ideologies of, and even love for, her kidnapers, and was subsequently charged in Red October bank robberies she took part in.

Stepford Wives is a novel that tells the tale of a community wherein a doctor used chemicals and mind control to groom and mold the community's wives into compliant and subservient partners to their husbands.

slice and slash themselves horribly; cutting off their own genitals, slashing their throats, cutting their arms in so many places there are only bumpy trails of scar tissue left on their arms and chest.

So many people come pre-damaged from their life before prison and it spills out in many different ways. Some create elaborate (if unsupportable) stories of wealth and success in the community, perhaps it's to convince themselves, or perhaps it's so they can live in a world where they can believe that someone believes they have a wonderful life, even if it is only by imaginary proxy. Others, paradoxically, adopt the ill-informed mantra of the prison industrial complex (PIC) and assume rigid conservative "tough on crime" attitudes. It may seem like a "rehabilitation," but it is more likely to be a manifestation of a "Correctional" Stockholm Syndrome.⁻¹⁶ It seems obvious that the prison system wants prisoners to become "Stepford"⁻¹⁷ prisoners, but these developments are unhealthy for the prisoner.

There is no doubt that change is found in these places: sometimes change is obvious and sometimes it's hidden, sometimes the change is understood and sometimes it isn't. Sometimes the changes can be productive in spite of the unnatural and harsh conditions, but most times it is counterproductive, and if an individual is able to make positive changes in themselves it cannot reasonably be tied to the fictional propaganda premise of "correctional rehabilitation."

Difficulty

For me the most difficult aspect of prison is witnessing how prisoners are diminished, degraded, and destroyed in these places. I see it happening, and I am unable to help them. The damage is delivered in subtle and

imperceptible events and procedures, which over time have come to be “normalized” as prisoners are desensitized to it, and therefore unaware of it. The closest comparison would be how a frog in a pot full of water won’t notice the temperature gradually increase until it’s too late for the frog.

Our social conditioning through the education system and the news and entertainment media teaches us that only bad people go to prison, and society is safer due to prisons. Our collective adoption of these “truths” makes it difficult for the general public to see prisoners as people; it’s so much easier to label them as misfits, pariahs, and monsters. Canadians look down their noses at other countries’ failing “justice systems” but turn a blind eye from their own system because they blindly trust the oversight mechanisms will protect the rights of all Canadians. That confidence is misplaced.

If you are aboriginal or black you are more likely to be arrested and more likely to be imprisoned. If you are a visible minority in prison in Canada, you will stay in prison longer, more likely be placed in segregation, and stay in isolation cells longer than your white counterparts. I’ve been in prison thirty-one years, and I see no evidence of anything resembling justice coming from this system. Everything about “corrections” is approached from a punitive logic, and the “tough on crime” agenda encourages this type of short-sighted, vengeance-driven approach. This current system allows hurt and angry (victimized) people to feel as if something has been fixed by hitting it (the perpetrator) harder.

The vast majority of prisoners are not in prison for violent crimes, and they generally come from impoverished backgrounds and have also been victimized in their own lives. They can be broken down into a variety of sub-groups of disadvantaged and vulnerable people. Prisoners generally don’t have the resources, political capital, or community support to defend themselves.

Stephen D. Hart,
C. Michie, and D.J.
Cooke, "Precision
of Actuarial Risk
Assessment
Instruments
Evaluating
the 'Margin of
Error' of Group
v. Individual
Predictions
of Violence,"
British Journal of
Psychiatry 190, no.
49 (2007): 6.

Contrary to current conservative political and media hype, the rules are not bent towards providing an unfair advantage to people convicted of crimes. There is no open-door policy to get out of prison, and there never was; Canada has some of the longest prison sentences in the world. When parole hearings come up every couple of years the process is presented as a nuisance and a waste of the parole board's time, or worse, an affront to victims. The prison system uses psychiatric and psychological "experts" who are in the business of labelling, categorizing, and identifying who is a risk and who is not. This mental healthcare offshoot self-validates their value to the process of industrial incarceration and lends their medical credentials to their prison paymasters by pathologizing prisoners. The system has developed a medical hybrid language to lend weight to their pronouncements of risk, which are then used to justify holding someone behind prison walls. They are, in my opinion, a correctional version of the "Dionne Warwick Psychic Hotline Network."

Unfortunately, both hotlines are flawed, and correctional psychologists over-predict risk¹⁸ using Actuarial Risk Assessment Instruments (ARAI's), thereby preventing the release of prisoners. The accuracy of these predictions can't be proven wrong because the prisoner is not released, based on the prediction. However, The British Journal of Psychiatry (2007) published Dr. Stephen D. Hart's paper, "Precision of Actuarial Risk Assessment Instruments Evaluation of the 'Margins of Error' of Group v. Individual Predictions of Violence," which states that, "The ARAI's cannot be used to estimate an individuals risk for future violence with any reasonable degree of certainty and should be used with great caution or not at all." This evaluation by clinical and research experts found that risk estimates at the individual level were so high as to render risk estimates virtually meaningless.

Having watched people's lives and relationships be destroyed by prison has been painful. I believe prison mistreats and dehumanizes prisoners, and teaches them that they are unworthy of dignity, respect, or human rights. It is this curriculum that convinces many prisoners that the law is not applied fairly for everyone, and certainly not for them. After all, most of Canada's prisoners have had lives filled with personal crisis from day one; poverty, racism, classism, limited education, and few job opportunities. In prison, the "rehabilitation lessons" administered by "corrections" are brutal and degrading and serve no useful purpose. Complicit correctional psychologists "evaluate" prisoners based on a moment in time and then narrate a story based on that moment as if that reflection is all the prisoner is, and ever was. With that approach, prisoners are just human debris dumped into high-security landfills.

If Canada was interested in dealing with the root causes of crime, they would look at the social disparity that has its roots in racism, classism, sexism, and withheld opportunity. Prison would be a last resort, not the first resort, and only violent people would end up in prison. Canada would employ the Aboriginal forms of transformative justice and healing circles to hold people accountable and work to heal individuals, families and communities that have been impacted by crime.

When it comes to "rehabilitation" I'm reminded of the saying, "The devil's greatest trick is convincing people he doesn't exist," and in this case the trick has been convincing society that "rehabilitation" exists in degrading, damaging, and dangerous prison warehouses.