

PRISON: A ROUNDTABLE CONVERSATION WITH LIFERS

with Gee, Kato, and Just Another Number

Prisons, prisoners, and the discourse that surrounds them are often made inaccessible to the outside community. We are too often fed fear-mongering propaganda that legitimizes extreme punitive measures at any cost. The prison discourse is most often completely one-sided (the system's version) or when critical, from the outside looking in. Since prisoners' voices are often silenced, their accounts on crime and justice are rare. This conversation is an attempt to make some of these voices heard.

The following is a conversation with two men that I have come to know through my involvement in a prison lifers' group. Both men are currently serving life sentences in Canada, which means that they have served a long-term sentence inside and upon release, are on parole for life. Their names have been changed due to the fact that prisoners and those involved in prison groups are not allowed to share their thoughts and experiences about prison.

Gee: There is an assumption that being inside prison is easy. What do you think?

Kato: Most people look at the physical aspect of prison. Prison has gotten a lot better throughout the years, that is to say there is less physical hardship. But on an emotional level it is far from being easy, which is why the suicide rate is high. It can be compared to work. With unions, a lot of the jobs got better. You look at some jobs as great and easy, yet burnout is higher than ever before. That is to say that on an emotional level, some jobs aren't that easy. The boss is too demanding, your supervisor is an asshole, and so on. But on the street

you can always change jobs or seek medical leave... while in prison you're stuck, there's no way out. And we're not talking about a day or a year but years of living with that pressure.

Another aspect of prison that people don't seem to get—I guess you have to live it to understand it—has to do with loved ones. Can you imagine that all of a sudden you could only see them once a week? I think you would have a very hard time dealing with that. This is perhaps one of the hardest parts of prison. You could send me to live on a nice tropical island with room and board, but without the people I love, I wouldn't be happy. Yes, I understand that I committed a crime and that society said that I should go to prison, but don't tell me I'm doing easy time. I didn't find anything easy about prison. Yes, I had a roof over my head and three meals a day, but my loved ones were not with me. and other people were in total control of my life.

Just Another Number: Before I was incarcerated, I never gave more than a moment's thought to the world inside prisons. After being incarcerated, a moment rarely slips by without some scar from the "inside" having a presence. During my time, I have lived through the current swing towards more punitive conditions. A political move through and through.

To give you some perspective, imagine living in a six-by-nine-foot concrete box for twenty-three and a half hours a day. A shower every three days, where even lukewarm water was a cause to bring a smile to your face. Two men living in the same cell was common and everyone knew that was a powder keg waiting for a spark. A blue-suited robot with the keys more often than not was that spark. I often thought about what makes someone want to be a prison guard. Still to this day, no suitable answer is to be found. Arrogance and lack of compassion are the norm. I found throughout my life when someone is in a dominant position, the true measure of their decency is revealed. The keepers

of the cages caused more harm to prisoners than prisoners ever did to themselves.

Verbal, physical, and psychological violence are their aims and orders. I staggered out, bloodied and torn, but out I finally am! But the invisible leash remains firmly attached. As intrusive as it is, it is better than going back in. It was a horrible place that the government made to be as unpleasant as their laws allow. If the law gets in the way, then they just make a new one.

Gee: Do you or did you feel like you were always being watched?

Just Another Number: While I was inside, I can say with certainty, yes, I was always being watched. The cameras are everywhere, the guards are always floating around sniffing, and the snitches are a story unto themselves. These snitches are recruited in several ways. They were afraid and sought protection, which has a price. Others were caught doing some infraction and were given a pass on punishment so long as they inform on their fellow prisoners. Some others were just cowards that wanted to cause someone else suffering and wanted someone else to do their dirty work. Inside, you can tangibly feel when you are not being watched. There is a lightening of the shoulders and you can close your eyes for a few moments defenseless. I believe I find comfort in solitude because of those little moments.

On parole, the ever-present physical reminders are out of eyesight, but never far from memory. The attention outside is different. Once you're out, you are mandated to see your parole officer every week. Failure to do so is an automatic violation of your parole conditions. These mandatory meetings are their chance to what I call "sniff." So, hiding the scars of the living hell you just survived is paramount, otherwise they view you as an undue risk and throw you back inside prison with no end date. Then, you

will not know when or if you will ever get out again.

Gee: Did or do you feel part of a community on the outside while you were in prison?

Kato: A big factor in the reality of prison life is the inability to find friends or possible relationships. Some guys run into situations that allow this to happen, but it is not a normal occurrence. For the most part, it is a lonely world that you get accustomed to and later turns into a way of life. The institution is supposed to encourage and accommodate such activity, but the fact is that they do the exact opposite. Their concerns over illegal activity block the way for those with a sincere interest in maintaining the ties they have with loved ones. The result is the urge to cut the ties with the ones you care about, in order to save them from becoming pawns in the sadistic games played by the prison administration! Things are done in the name of false prevention and unrealistic protection of the ones who support you, resulting in you being so discouraged that you cut it off and never let it happen again. Then when it comes time for release they have the nerve to ask why there is nobody there to support you? Anyone who has gone to a family visit or trailer in a prison or asked for a community assessment to go somewhere knows full well what this feels like! Is there no obligation on the part of the prison to treat visitors with more dignity than the way we are treated every day? Is there any accountability for those who deal with innocent people in support of those fallen from grace? They discourage visitors as much as possible through their portrayal of you, then they explain that this is done to make sure that the person is aware of what they are getting into. This should not be an excuse when prying into the lives of your family members! As for those in relationships, should it not be up to these individuals to set their own level of information sharing, rather than

having authorities dictate that for them, with regard to personal information that does not have anything to do with the protection of society, or the good order of the institution? What business is it of theirs what each knows about the other? And is what they tell your loved ones correct? So who can regulate this routine and what strategies are shared with the offender or professionals for the purpose of accountability? Consideration for the integrity of the external contact (loved one or community) should be a priority because of the importance of the role the contacts play in the rehabilitation process.

Just Another Number: When I first went in, I felt thrown away. Although my family in their grief tried to hold me close, I was slowly slipping away. Everywhere else in my social realm, I felt alone and unwilling to try to remedy the situation. It wasn't until I decided to come out of my cave that I began to reach out. It was surprising that a warm hand was offered... a slow steady progression of good, decent people willing to share a part of their lives with me. Those that came inside the prison and volunteered their time saved my life. So for me, I finally feel as if I am a part of the community that I want to be in.

Gee: How did you prepare yourself to get out of prison?

Kato: Is it assumed that the reintegration process is so simple that it does not warrant much attention? I have heard very little spoken about the readjustment of people who are now on society's doorstep after having been wrung out, strung out, and now thrown out! What about the individual skills he needs to become a contributing and profitable member of society after spending so long in prison? I've done all the programs set out by my classification team, and I'm supposed to be cured of the problems which led to my being in jail. The cold truth of

the matter is that after taking all of the programs set out, none of them addressed my problem! What I needed was to learn how to live with secure employment and financial stability, and yet none of this was offered! I had to create my own program in order to attempt to address my own needs.

It's a known fact that the prison institution claims to recognize this problem, but fails to take steps to address it. They think that slow reintegration is the only solution. What a failure of society and for society! Interaction with the outside world is vital to this process! At the end of my prison sentence, while in a minimum-security institution, I am supposed to have this reality before me. Now the problem is that if I don't have a substance abuse problem and I'm not involved with church activities, I don't qualify for group outings, which would give me credibility before the parole board. There are other outings, but all of them are related to volunteer work projects approved by the prison (not field training), and I believe they serve the institution more than the individual.

Nothing would be better than to work with people from the community who understand your dynamics and with people you are comfortable with. If you have this during your last stretch inside, then you can stay focused and get the most out your time, as opposed to wasting it. At some stage it's vital to the reintegration process to allow volunteers the chance to walk side by side with those with non-substance abuse problems in order to help them combat the effects of their sometimes very long prison stays. Luckily a small door was open to me at the prison, and this program gave me a link to the community, a volunteer network that helps long-term offenders with their reintegration. And this is very important because a link with the community is required to get paroled. It is a must to have someone you're comfortable with to share your feelings, fears, and thoughts without fear

of retribution... be it your family or some community resource. If you share some of the feelings with the prison staff, they will analyze it and decide that they perceive that a certain feeling or thought might mean that you are not ready yet and they will cut off your outings instead of helping you to deal with it. So you find yourself pushed back on your release program for a couple more years because you were a bit overwhelmed on your first outing, which is a normal reaction after years of incarceration. And two years later, when they let you try again, that feeling is still going to be there because you have to work on that slowly while you're reintegrating back into society.

We live with realities that for the most part are far beyond our control. We must re-adjust ourselves constantly as we venture through this world of deception and corruption. One of the problems about living in prison is the total lack of control you have over the events of the outside world. We try to go on with purpose and meaning in a direction of what is perceived to be right and just, but sometimes we find confusion in that reality, and that we really don't have a clue as to where we're going, or why we're doing anything. At times, life is held by such a small thread that a feeling of security is unattainable in the spectrum of conscious thought. When the balance is held insecurely, the chances of everything crashing down at a moment's notice seems more real. When you come to the point where you have lost everything meaningful in your life and all motivation because of prison's reality, you begin to find yourself again, and your understanding, as you search for new meaning. Many people are trying to find themselves, and prison is a reality that is not restricted to places of confinement. Life is a learning experience no matter where you are. As a prisoner, the label itself restricts you from certain things in life afforded to the regular citizen. The fact is that differences of social class, within society,

create the same reality for people who have never been in prison. This goes back to the rich/poor, strong/weak, etc. Today, prisons are less confrontational, conditions are somewhat better than days gone by, but upon closer inspection you find the new system is based on the exchange program, or what I call the Candy System. If you rat on another prisoner you will be rewarded by being given special privileges. The idea is to divide and conquer by turning one against the other for personal gain.

Upon release, a real concern is about getting a job. It's tough when you've been out of the work force for 30 years. I was often asked by my classification team about potential future employment. If I had the choice of doing anything for a living what would it be? Well, of course, the first response is a job with lots of overtime and acceptable pay. But after a period of reflection, try to find something you like doing in life and try to make a living at it. I would try to avoid having to do a job that I hate.

Just Another Number: I prepared myself by studying the system. Also, by working on myself... self-reflection is like most things, too much and you end up spinning around in a world of one. Having some knowledge of what Corrections needs and expects me to do has been an enormous help to me. I have learned to work around their hurdles. So, I stay off their radar and go about my business. A desire to try and find peace and do something meaningful with my life is the compass I follow. As for Corrections, they taught me several useful things, all of which I would gladly toss away except for the tools I found to navigate through the system.

Gee: What is parole and how does it work?

Kato: Your first day in prison is also your first day on parole. You are assigned a parole officer and a guard who will decide how to manage your case and these two are

going to watch your every move and analyze everything you say. What is scary about this is that their perception is often not necessarily the reality. If you're lucky you'll get somebody who has decent perception, although that is not often the case. For example, a mental error in perception that we often do is projection, which means that when an event happens to someone we project our thoughts and feelings on that person. "He must be very angry, I wouldn't take that." That is how we would feel in the same situation, but it doesn't mean that the other person feels that way... he might only be slightly irritated. But if you say that in prison, you might be told that you're lying or that you're minimizing the situation, then you have to take a new program to get in touch with your feelings. And when you have a verbal argument with somebody you get called in to explain yourself and they suggest that perhaps an anger management program would be good for you. What anger? In the case I am thinking about, we were just two guys arguing about who was the best hockey player. Yes loudly, but not in anger. So, try to imagine that for years there are people watching your every move and everything you say and their interpretation of the situation becomes the "gospel truth." I'm sure that if you look around you can see some assholes, or some people with a chip on their shoulder. Well, they're present in the prison system, too; now imagine that those people you just pointed out are in total control of your life. Life inside is not easy.

Just Another Number: Parole is the farce that's used to extend the system's involvement in your life. When someone is sentenced, a portion of the time the judge gives you is available to be spent on parole. At its inception, parole was meant to be a community's involvement in helping someone adjust and make their way back into society. It has been bastardized several times, all with the goal of widening the reach of Corrections, to be used as a political milking cow and as a tool to help keep the

prison-industrial complex functioning. Parole works like an invisible leash waiting to be yanked. A parolee must meet with his or her parole officer every week when they first get released from prison. A list of conditions are the scorecard that sets your fate. Break one of them and it's back to prison. The ironic part is that the correctional system is so driven to follow their minders' wishes that they are setting unreachable goals for prisoners to attain for parole. I'm surprised that they need to put so many safeguards on people after they are deemed fit to return to society.

It's all designed to fail so that they can have flexibility with the flow and ebb of the fuel that runs the system. The condemned! When parole is revoked for a violation, the person is tossed back in prison. A violation does not necessarily mean that you have committed another crime... it means you may have breached a condition. Within a month or two, your case will be assessed by the parole board for a decision on a full parole revoke. You don't get to represent yourself at this stage. So if you breach, you go back in for who knows how long. Sad and simple.

Gee: How do you relate to the idea of transparency? What does this mean?

Kato: Parole officers ask that you be totally transparent about the life that you lead on the outside, yet they are the least transparent people that I know. Being totally transparent is very hard because in this context, it means you must tell them about everything significant in your life. Yet something that is insignificant to me may be significant to my parole officer, and I, therefore, lack transparency because I didn't tell him. I have to adjust my thinking to his thoughts of what is significant and what is not to attempt to be safe from his wrath... sending me back inside for not telling him something he deems important.

Just Another Number: The idea behind transparency was explained to me as a valuable necessity that is the cornerstone of the relationship between someone on parole and their parole officer. The parole officer has to feel that you are being completely honest and always willing to volunteer information about your life. If they feel doubtful, they can put you back in prison because there is a “lack of transparency.” It’s a pitfall for those doing parole. The proof is very discretionary—an opinion someone has—and changing someone’s illusion is very difficult.

The vagueness and the rationale for using this practice is so maddeningly selfish it literally makes me groan. Since every parole officer has a different itchy trigger finger, it makes assessing people’s tolerances a necessary skill. That’s way too much discretion given to a parole officer. Personally, I think transparency is akin to a field filled with landmines. One false move and life gets complicated very quickly.

Gee: Victims of violence groups often gear their energy towards punitive measures and keep the victims involved in the criminal cases for decades. The victims remain victims and there is little place for healing. How would you deal with someone else causing harm to you or your loved ones?

Kato: Today it seems that with the victims groups, the media, and Harper [the Canadian Prime Minister], everyone is geared on tougher sentences and cutting different community programs that help crime prevention. Punishment is the new word, yet the crime rate has steadily been going down. You would think that community programs were helping, but the budget for these programs has been cut. Statistics show that some programs like restitution, where the convicted and the victim interact, had a good success rate and that victims find closure. Instead, they send these young offenders to prison for punishment and

spend millions of dollars more than the cost of community programs. These policies are not based on logic but on revenge. And the prisons have also become an institution that does not want to die. Since the crime rate has gone down, they have made it harder for people to get out and even tougher to stay out. And you should know that in crime statistics, parole violations are considered a crime so they make it seem like prisons populations are growing in number when in reality, it's a lot of the same people who are back in for parole violations (transparency, disorganization, etc.), and not because they committed an actual crime.

Yes, I personally understand what it's like to have a loved one attacked for no good reason. My feelings to seek revenge were very strong, and all kinds of punishment went through my head. But in the end, I know that wouldn't have given me any closure. After spending decades in prison, I know that this is not the solution and in most cases the new prisoner that comes to jail is not there for an act of violence. After doing prison time and getting out, they will come back because they committed an act of violence. And yet, the community at large still thinks that prison is the solution, the ultimate punishment. I would like to see the ones who hurt my loved one get help within the community because I know prison isn't the solution. Hate is what fucked up my life, so revenge is not the solution! This train of thought only came to me after I found closure. I do believe that when I was a teenager if I would have been put in the right environment instead of jail, I would not have continued my life of crime. Being a teen that wanted to belong to something, I was easy to influence... so being in jail, I became valued as one of the boys. My principles became the same as other "criminals," and slowly violence entered the picture. So for one stupid mistake I made when I was a teen I became a hardened "criminal." This is not to excuse my actions... I still live with the guilt of my actions, but I cannot take them

back. So I live to better myself and live to try to make life better for those around me and my community.

Just Another Number: Throughout my experiences, I have seen how anger can make compassion a tiny whisper within a roar of rage. Living with my own scars reminding me of empty violence, I keep looking for solutions. As a person who has caused great harm and who has also been on the receiving end, it has allowed me to see a more complete picture of the aftermath of violence.

As to how I would deal with someone who caused harm to me or my loved ones, I would want to confront the person. Not for vengeance, but to try to understand why this harm occurred and to try to start the process of healing. Through my own self-reflection, I have come to understand and accept that people in pain cause pain. Who would want to hurt someone when they are at peace themselves? By striving for empathy, I do not dismiss the person who has caused me harm into a category that allows me to view them as a thing rather than as a human being. I feel this is vital in order for me to heal since I do not want to further harm myself.

If I accept the model that vengeance is the accepted methodology, I can never see an end to my pain. If I harm someone and the people who care for that person harm me in retaliation, then someone who cares for me can justify harming that person... and so on. The cycle never ends, and it will ripple across and affect everyone in a destructive way.