

***Prison Reform: A Beginning***  
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I am not an expert on prison reform. Not even close. But I have been to prison three times. Not as an inmate, mind you, but simply as a visitor. The first two visits I made were to the Washington State Reformatory at Monroe, a medium-security men's prison. The first time, I was with a group of volunteers from a Lutheran church, including one of my dearest girlfriends. We were there to visit with a bunch of guys in the Concerned Lifers' Organization. The Concerned Lifers were men serving sentences of 20 years or more, men who often were convicted of violent crimes.

My friend's pastor, the Rev. Jon Nelson, was the main sponsor of the group, and largely responsible for its culture of compassion. The Lifers, you see, were committed to the greater good. They tried to educate themselves while behind bars. They raised money for the crime victims' restitution fund. They also raised money to help a respected guard pay medical bills after her partner was stricken with fatal cancer. About them, Jon Nelson said, "These are [guys] that have turned their life around. They've been in eight or 10 years and said 'this bitterness is not going to get me anywhere,' so then they begin to turn to wanting to do good things." The men, themselves, though, looked scary. Most of them smoked, many had tattoos, and big biceps developed in the prison weight room.

On my second visit to Monroe, I did something I had never done before and have never done since: I was a bridesmaid. My dear friend married one of the Concerned Lifers – a man convicted of (named violent crime). It was just like a normal wedding, except for the bars on the windows.... Actually, it was awful; I couldn't believe she was marrying this guy -- he was terribly slick and manipulative. But she said she loved him, and asked me to support her, and so, against my better judgment, I did. To my great relief, they divorced some years later.

My third trip to prison was many years later, after I had become a minister. I went with a volunteer from the local Methodist church to the Women's Correctional Facility in Purdy, Washington, where I was a guest speaker for a Toastmaster's Club organized behind the prison walls. I was to be an example of "good speaking," and the women listened carefully, and asked careful questions afterwards. They were on their best behavior, for any transgression would result in their Toastmaster's privilege being revoked. There was no chance for one-on-one conversation – everything was carefully controlled and highly artificial.

These three experiences were brief, but they have formed a frame of reference for me about prison life and those who live it. But for the most part, I

have always assumed that most people in prison deserve to be there, and that while the system is flawed, it also is necessary.

At the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly two years ago, (2003) the delegates selected Criminal Justice and Prison Reform as a topic for two years of study and action. The first paragraph of the Draft Statement of Conscience on these issues tells us why. It reads: "The United States has become a nation of incarceration. While Americans take pride in a Constitutional democracy promising freedom, liberty and justice for all, the incarceration rate in the United States is five to tenfold that of other democracies. Our penal system is increasingly rife with mandatory sentencing, longer terms, racial and ethnic profiling, and deplorable jail and prison conditions. The magnitude of the injustices and inequities of this system are in discord with all the United States stands for. As a faith community committed to the inherent goodness and possibility of each of us, we are compelled to speak truth to this dissonance between our promises and practice."

What does it mean to speak truth to the dissonance between our promises and practice? Well, despite the fact that both our words for chalice lighting and the story this morning talked about forgiveness, it doesn't mean that I or we should, as one of my colleagues put it, "paint all of our prison population in America with the great brush of liberal pity and delusions of innocent victimhood..." and therefore let them all go free. (*From the Rev. Victoria Weinstein's excellent sermon, "Remember My Chains."*) Crime is real, and some of us know this first hand.

But speaking truth to the dissonance between our promises and practice does mean striving to understand the issues, to view them in the light of our religious commitments to the inherent worth and dignity of all people and to justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; and then to take appropriate action.

When we do this, we stand in a long line of Unitarian and Universalist forebears. On the Universalist side of our heritage, action for prison reform goes all the way back to the 1770s and John Murray, the first man to preach Universalism in America. Murray had spent a term in debtor's prison in London, and after coming to America, preached to prisoners as a part of his ministry. He wrote about his experiences, and his words were distributed widely among the Universalists of his time.

Other Universalists were active in prison reform as well. At the Universalist General Convention of 1899, the Rev. Quillen Shinn urged all Universalist churches to observe the fourth Sunday of every October as Prison Sunday. I did not know this when I decided on this sermon topic – but that's today – a wonderful coincidence. Writing about the National Prison Congress held in Indianapolis around this time, Quillen Shinn declared that among the

prison reformers, "...over and over... the great principle of Universalism was insisted upon, namely, that punishment is not to satisfy justice or vindicate the law, but to cure the criminal." He wrote of the religious conviction that man is "wicked but not worthless" and that "there are no incorrigibles."

There were prison reformers on the Unitarian side of our heritage as well. The one who comes most easily to mind is Dorothea Dix. In the winter of 1841, Dix was asked by a friend to teach a Sunday School class for women at the East Cambridge House of Corrections in Massachusetts. At the jail, Dix was appalled to see that people who were mentally ill were incarcerated with criminals. Her indignation catapulted her into a lifelong crusade -- she visited hundreds of jails, almshouses, prisons and workhouses to survey conditions, which she found shocking. Mentally ill inmates were routinely caged, beaten, chained, deprived of fresh air and sunlight, poorly fed, given no medical care, and were often found filthy, naked, physically weak, and lying in their own excrement. Dix wrote detailed, lengthy reports that she convinced her influential friends to present to legislators. Her goal was to establish hospitals for the care of the indigent insane -- and she was very successful in doing so. She also became a zealous advocate for prison reform, and wrote a book about it, called *Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline*, in 1845. (from <http://www.extramile.us/honorees/dix.cfm> )

But what about now? As of June 30, 2003, according to statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice 2,078,570 prisoners were held in Federal or State prisons or in local jails. There were an estimated 480 prison inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents.

There were 4,834 black male prisoners per 100,000 black men in the United States in prison or jail, compared to 1,778 Hispanic male inmates per 100,000 Hispanic men and 681 white male inmates per 100,000 white men.

In 2003, 3.2% of all U.S. adult residents or 1 in every 32 adults were on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole at year end 2003.

Here in Wisconsin, our prison population tripled between 1990 and 2000. Indeed, there are so many Wisconsin inmates that more than 1300 of them must be held out of state. ([www.jsonline.com/news/state/may04/228330.asp](http://www.jsonline.com/news/state/may04/228330.asp) )

If these numbers sound shockingly high, well, they are. The number of people incarcerated or involved in other ways as offenders in the criminal justice system today is unprecedented in the history of the United States and in the history of the world. Like the town of Grudgeville, our nation is bent over double with the weight of those we have imprisoned, and like Grudgeville, we have forgotten how to do anything different about it.

What's it like in prison these days – is it as bad as it was in the days of Dorothea Dix? Listen to these words from Bill Pawlyk, an inmate at the Monroe prison:

### **Jail**

The hard steel doors slam shut  
and seal me here inside  
I'm caged in these walls—  
cold concrete, steel and glass:  
cell boundaries I can't pass.  
...And chilling, hissing drafts  
go whistling through the vents.  
The coldness fills my pores  
and ceaseless routine bores.  
I sleep on a cement bunk  
like a medieval monk.  
While harsh fluorescent light  
flickers all day and night.  
And ever spying eyes  
scan my every note;  
they're looking for some clue  
of things I never knew.  
... While visits mean so much,  
they're held without touch  
through separating glass,  
and phones all talk must pass  
so probing ears can hear.  
Snitch spies among us squeal  
to ease their own ordeal.  
I watch the world outside  
through narrow glassed-in slits.  
There's no one here to tell  
what deep within me dwells.  
With no one near to trust  
my soul within me rusts.  
So here in jail I must  
alone my remorse bear  
so far from friends who care. ...

Less poetic, but more to the point is this report from Bonnie Urfer, arrested for anti-nuclear protesting in Wisconsin and sentenced to 30 days in jail. ([http://www.wiprison.org/files/nl\\_2004\\_June.pdf](http://www.wiprison.org/files/nl_2004_June.pdf)) In the June 2004 issue of the newsletter of the non-profit, prison reform organization "Money, Education and Prisons", she writes, "In the one month I spent split evenly between the Dane County Jail and the Rock County Jail, I lost 10 pounds. Inmates in the Dane

County Jail are seriously hungry. The Rock County Jail supplies more carbohydrates but still aren't enough to prevent weight loss.

"Poverty is exacerbated by the jail because each visit to the nurse costs money. Each aspirin administered costs money. If an inmate has no funds, a negative balance is kept on her account. If family or friends deposit money into her inmate fund, the jail takes it to pay the cost of her "treatment." Several women carried a negative balance and never were able to purchase shampoo, tampons, shirts, underwear, socks or shoes.

"I paid 53 cents to purchase a pre-stamped envelope with 37 cents in postage on it. Envelopes were like gold. Especially since making phone calls often isn't an option.

"Women in Rock County are desperate. Stealing one another's commissary items is common. Toilet paper is delivered only on Saturday. Two women share one industrial roll. By Thursday, people are on the prowl for toilet paper.

"The jail provides one small bar of industrial soap per week. Uniforms and sheets are exchanged once a week. Everyone arrested comes in with one pair of underwear and maybe a pair of socks. For indigent inmates, getting another pair of underwear from commissary isn't an option.

"Release from jail should be easy but this also is an exercise in frustration. The ... jail sits on the edge of town. If a person has any funds when getting out, the Sheriff's Department issues a check to the inmate. Release takes place between 5 and 6 a.m. There is no place to cash a check at that time. No one leaves with any cash for the bus or taxi or even a phone call."

More horrifying, but perhaps even more important to hear is the perspective of Bonnie Kerness, a human rights advocate with the American Friends Service Committee who writes in the same "Money, Education and Prisons" newsletter.

Inviting us to hear from some of the voices that she hears in her daily work, she quotes from letters she's received recently.

"This is from a letter by a social worker at Utah State prison who writes, "John was directed to leave the strip cell and a urine soaked pillow case was placed over his head like a hood. He was walked, shackled and hooded to a different cell where he was placed in a device called "the chair"....he was kept in the chair for over 30 hours resulting in extreme physical and emotional suffering."

"Another writer in Arizona describes a man being placed in a restraint chair. He was stripped naked and placed in the chair with his buttocks several

inches below his knees. His arms and legs were then cuffed and shackled to the legs of the chair to prevent him from moving. He was left uncovered and unprotected in pain for over 24 hours. Mobility was nonexistent. He couldn't relieve himself without soiling himself..."

"From Florida, "during the struggle jailers shocked Norberg multiple times with stun guns. Inmates who witnessed his death estimate that he was shocked between eight and twenty times. The medical examiner put it at 22 times...."

"From Colorado, "I was sprayed with pepper spray and it was 10 hours before I was allowed to wash. This resulted in burns and blisters to my arms, face, chest and feet. For the entire 10 hours I felt like I was being boiled alive. When you are forced to stand in the sun with no shelter, the sweat from your body continues to reactivate this chemical agent so that you remain in extreme pain."

But as hard as these stories are to hear, there is still something worse. We are accustomed to thinking of our penal system as one of both punishment and reform or rehabilitation. In early American history, the corrections system was basically a system of corporal punishment. This changed when "The Quakers, beginning with William Penn's colonial government in Pennsylvania, aimed through the incarceration of criminals to prevent further harm to citizens, and to encourage prisoners to penitent reflection, hence the term 'penitentiary.' The hope was that the prisoner would truly reform before returning to society." (*From V. Weinstein's "Remember My Chains."* [www.gis.net/~fpnma/sermons/chains.html](http://www.gis.net/~fpnma/sermons/chains.html))

But today, rather than being in the main a system of corrections of any kind, our penal system is an industry. It produces billions in profits every year. Listen to Bonnie Kerness, "I've heard people say that the criminal justice system doesn't work. I've come to believe exactly the opposite – that it works perfectly as a matter of both economic and political policy. I don't believe it is an accident that people who are perceived as economic liabilities have been suddenly turned into a major economic asset. That young males of color who the country labels worthless to the economy suddenly generate between 30 and 60 thousand dollars a year once trapped in the criminal justice system. The expansion of prisons, parole, probation, the court and police systems has resulted in an enormous bureaucracy which has been a boon to everyone from architects, plumbers, and electricians to food and medical vendors – all with one thing in common - a pay check earned by keeping human beings in cages. The criminalization of poverty is a lucrative business and we've replaced the social safety net with a dragnet. I doubt that this would be tolerated if we were talking about mostly white folks or mostly rich folks." She later continues, "...we need to understand that there are two million mostly poor and people of color in our prisons and juvenile detention facilities, not because of any rise in crime but because of the legislation of mandatory minimum sentences, and drug and 3

strikes laws. We have a system of apartheid in the US, which gives whites using cocaine probation, while imprisoning youth of color who use crack.”

This is the horrible truth: keeping people in prison is good for corporate America in a way that providing treatment, rehabilitation, and job skills aren't. And our legislators – many of them – know this and actively pursue it.

If you think this sounds crazy, consider the American Legislative Exchange Council, also known by its acronym, ALEC. The stated mission of ALEC is "to advance the Jeffersonian principles of free markets, limited government, federalism and individual liberty among America's state legislators..." which sounds like it might not be all bad, except for the fact that ALEC's main purpose is to provide a conduit for powerful corporations to shape legislation that is then enacted into law by either naïve or complicit state legislators. ALEC claims 2,400 state legislators as members, which is nearly one-third of the state legislators in the country. It has more than three hundred corporate sponsors including Turner, a construction giant and the nation's number one builder of prisons, and Wackenhut, a security and private prison corporation.

One of the ways ALEC works is by developing model legislation on the issues of concern to its sponsors, which it then works to get passed in as many state legislatures as possible through its national political network. ALEC has proposed that many public services be taken over by for-profit private businesses, including schools, prisons, public transportation, and social and welfare services. The ALEC website trumpets, "Since its founding, ALEC has amassed an unmatched record of achieving ground-breaking changes in public policy. Policies such as mandatory minimum sentencing for violent criminals, teacher competency testing, pension reform, and Enterprise Zones represent just a handful of ALEC's victories in the states." The Corrections Corporation of America, which dominates the private prison business (it builds and runs prisons in twenty-one states and Puerto Rico), pays \$2,000 a year for a seat on ALEC's Criminal Justice Task Force, which writes the group's "model" legislation on crime and punishment.

Knowing these realities, while hard to take, is good for us. They remind us that the challenge of prison reform is for us a religious and spiritual challenge, as well as a call to action.

The call to action is perhaps the most clear. The Draft Statement of Conscience on Criminal Justice and Prison Reform asks us as individuals and as a congregation to:

- Educate ourselves and others about the local, state, and federal correctional facilities located within our communities.

- Network with interfaith ministries in our communities that provide services to individuals while incarcerated and following their release as well as services to their families.
- Establish Unitarian Universalist prison ministries.
- Support candidates for legislative and judicial office who support restorative justice and oppose the death penalty.
- Communicate our support for federally subsidized housing and supportive services to our congressional representatives.
- Discover whether local correctional facilities provide peer-counseling programs and get involved or begin one.
- Advocate for alternatives to incarceration, discretionary sentencing, funding for legal services, and an end to the War on Drugs.
- Work to ensure that every child receives quality public education and supportive services including age-appropriate recreational services.
- Advocate for increased federal and state funding of community mental health services.

The spiritual challenge is for us to shed our stereotypes of criminals. To remember, really remember, that racism and classism are more than personal prejudice, they are systems of oppression and privilege that are institutionalized in so many of our nation's systems and organizations – especially our criminal justice system. To think deeply about what it is that needs to happen when someone has done harm in our world – do we really believe that human dignity is served when people are locked up for long periods of time and subjected to subhuman conditions? Our spiritual challenge is to look beyond our fears of becoming victims of crime, and to face the larger societal issues that create criminals and victims with compassion foremost in our minds and hearts.

This sermon is a beginning, but only that. There are many ways to be involved – some that our Social Action Committee is already undertaking -- including a key opportunity coming up in just a few weeks. Our local Southeast Wisconsin UU Council is sponsoring a conference on prison reform to be held in Mequon in early November. The upcoming election also presents us with an opportunity – it is not too late to learn how our chosen candidates stand on these important issues, and to vote for those who would represent reform and change.

And as we engage, let us not forget Barbara Bache-Wiig's words, "Forgive should be an action word a thinking word a work word an again and again word...." Let us not forget the people of Grudgeville and the magic words the wise man brought them.

Let us not forget to be just, to be fair, to be compassionate, in all the ways we live, and with all the people whom our lives touch.

Amen.

## More resources

<http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=6990>

[www.alec.org](http://www.alec.org)

<http://www.mediatransparency.org/recipients/alec.htm>

[http://www.fact-index.com/a/am/american legislative exchange council.html](http://www.fact-index.com/a/am/american_legislative_exchange_council.html)

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/correct.htm>