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Dehumanization: The Incarcerated Experience

Antoine Davis*

“Open your mouth! Show me your gums, behind your ears, hands, lift your scrotum, turn around, bottom of your feet, bend and spread. Now get dressed!”

The guard barked these orders at me and then shoved my underwear back into my hands. I got dressed as quickly as I could, holding tightly to my dignity as I pushed through the visiting room door to return to my unit.

I always look forward to time with my family—laughing, eating, and conversing with the people I love. I endure these strip searches because maintaining these relationships is a key part of how I hang onto my sense of humanity in prison. But when the visiting period ends, the joy of those connections is quickly diminished by the dehumanizing process of exposing the private parts of my body to a prison guard once again.

Some of the threats and challenges for prisoners, from everyday boredom to life-threatening violence, are relatively easy to describe. But what is difficult to convey is the prison system’s relentless attempts to banish our humanity, which causes many to lose hope behind bars. A humiliating strip search conducted by a random guard is only one of many examples.

Imagine what it would be like to push a broom, scrub toilets and showers shared by countless people, or till a large field in 90-degree weather—all for forty-two cents an hour. Then, imagine handling thousands of bags of

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dirty laundry during a pandemic or slaving half your day away in a kitchen for sixty-five cents an hour. Many incarcerated people are forced to work like this for pennies or face disciplinary action. Incarcerated individuals who refuse to work may be confined to their cells for weeks. Sometimes they are shipped to a different facility, possibly hundreds of miles away from their support system, which makes it nearly impossible for the prisoner to maintain healthy relationships with family and friends. And, to make matters more degrading, prisoners usually do not get all those pennies. The criminal legal system imposes financial obligations, such as costly court fees with high interest rates that not even a month’s pay can cover. Add the cost of incarceration—that’s right, prisoners often have to pay for the *privilege* of being locked up—and more than half of that sixty-five cents can disappear before it ever touches their accounts.

These unjust practices, along with the barking orders of aggressive guards who seek to flex their power in the presence of their colleagues, are part of daily life. But something more insidious haunts many prisoners—the way that prison locks you into being the person you once were and thwarts your growth. The hidden burden that has crushed the souls of many incarcerated individuals does not necessarily lie in the plantation-type experience of prison, although it certainly plays its part. Rather, it is the realization that no matter how much growth and development prisoners undergo, they cannot transcend the choices that landed them in prison.

For example, in his early twenties, Jontae Chatman made an unwise choice after one of his closest friends was nearly killed by a senseless act of violence. In the heat of the moment, Chatman chose to retaliate, and a life was taken. Although Chatman had no criminal history, Chatman’s sentence took him from his child and community for the rest of his life.

After nearly ten years of incarceration, Chatman was informed that his mother had unexpectedly died of cancer. During his time in prison, he was known for maintaining a high GPA in college, facilitating the Redemption Program (a course that helps incarcerated people transition from a criminal
mindset to healthy thinking), and expressing exceptional behavior. Chatman asked to attend his mother’s funeral and was granted permission. He began making mental and emotional preparations to say his final goodbyes to his mother; but, on the day that Chatman was to be transferred, the prison administration abruptly reversed its decision. Even though Chatman had years of exceptional behavior under difficult circumstances, he was denied the opportunity to see his mother for the last time because of the acts he had committed nearly a decade prior. Prison officials apparently still saw him as a threat, and nothing Chatman had done could change their view of him.

These kinds of scenarios can crush the spirit of incarcerated people. Prisoners demonstrate they can change, but too often they remain inhumanely shackled by the system. It’s not just through the cell that confines their bodies, but through a bureaucracy that forever chains them to their previous mistakes.

This dehumanization happens not in spite of, but often because of, prison protocols. For example, the Washington State Department of Corrections created an assessment survey called “Washington One” that is supposed to help prison guards and facility staff evaluate prisoners. The survey directs counselors to inquire about the prisoner’s crime, residence, associations, feelings about the crime, and much more. Through personal experience, I have found that despite years of education, employment, and good behavior, many prisoners were classified as highly violent even though they had displayed no violence over the course of their imprisonment. Others were labeled as being at high risk of addiction, even though they hadn’t used a drug in over fifteen years. Washington One’s algorithm gives too much weight to what incarcerated individuals did prior to their incarceration, while greatly minimizing what they have done since.

No one argues that prison should be like a vacation. But when studies show that serious illnesses, such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, are five times higher among incarcerated people than the general population, something’s wrong. When studies show that after release, incarcerated
people have higher rates of institutionalized personality traits like distrust in others, difficulty maintaining relationships, and difficulty in decision making, something’s wrong. When 80% of incarcerated individuals are released and eventually return to prison, something’s wrong.

As long as the criminal justice system—and the larger society—insists on treating the incarcerated individual as an “other” who is not fully human, these kinds of harsh and dehumanizing treatments are inevitable. Why can’t we see prisoners as full members of the society they were removed from, not as monsters, but as community members who have made mistakes? Until society embraces that principle, we’ll be stuck with a broken system that undermines the public safety it claims to promote.

Two weeks after my twenty-first birthday, I was condemned to sixty-three years of imprisonment. In essence, I was told that 22,995 days of my life would be reduced to a system that would treat me less than human. I continue to hold onto my dignity. But the system will endure until enough people decide that in spite of our obvious flaws and imperfections, we are all family.