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5 Positive Steps to Reform Prisons

DECEMBER 9, 2013 BY THE EDITORS 3 COMMENTS

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Renowned prison reform activist Ken Hartman gives his insights into how we can reform our broken system.

We already know the prisons in this country are broken, and we have begun the process of rethinking the idea of what incarceration means, should mean, and will mean in the future.

Punishment for the sake of inflicting pain has lost its hold on the public's imagination.

And not a moment too soon, because the damage done is extensive. The questions of the moment are what to do to reform the prisons, and how these efforts would change things. Let's start with what to do.

- 1. Take out the humiliating uniforms.** This country is addicted to the counterintuitive notion that dressing people up in clothing specifically designed to denigrate and dehumanize will force them to become better. The truth is obviously the opposite. As someone who has been compelled to wear the uniform of shame for more than three decades, I can state with great certainty that nothing useful is gained by this practice. (A practice the rest of the world long ago abandoned as both counterproductive and inhumane.) Stealing away anyone's humanity robs everyone of their own humanity.
- 2. Invite the community inside.** Every prison sits in a local community, usually a small rural town, and is part of a broader more amorphous "community" comprised of where we come from, where we stand in the social stratum, and where the prison community fits into these larger contexts. Society, directly and indirectly, is responsible for what "prison" is, and absence breeds fear and loathing—the fuel necessary to sustain ill-treatment. Every opportunity to bring people in should be taken. What happens inside these places should matter to the rest of the world, but what's going on unseen is more easily dismissed, more easily overlooked.

- 3. Volunteer your talents; allow us to volunteer ours.** On both sides of the fence are great needs too often

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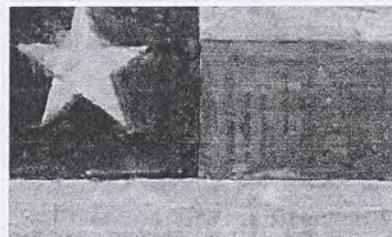
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Going Home to Newtown

EDITOR'S NOTE: This post first ran on Dec. 20, 2012, one week after the tragedy of Newtown, as Sean Beaudoin returned to his hometown and grappled with what had happened.



What's So Wrong With Patriotic

unmet because of a lack of manpower. On this side, consequent to the unfortunate combination of decades of punitive policies and the last few years of fiscal cutbacks, there is a desperate need for teachers, counselors, mentors, and others capable of helping us learn how to live productive and useful lives. While it's not in the interests of the prison system, imparting the skills necessary to stay out of prison is in the interest of society writ large. On the other side, on the "out" side, how many projects languish due to a dearth of strong backs and willing hands? In here there is no shortage of either. There is only lacking the channels through which to direct the pent-up energy. No job is too menial or too tedious for prisoners to undertake. Because the desire to make amends is virtually bottomless in the average prisoner, the will to work for the common good is inexhaustible.

4. Restore funding for higher education. In the mid-90s, at the depth of the "get tough" madness that overcame rational thinking, all funding for prisoners attending higher education ended. Factually, no other rehabilitative program has ever shown better outcomes. In the state of Massachusetts, for instance, a 25-year longitudinal study found that for parolees who had completed a four-year degree program, the rate of failure was zero. And that's not a misprint. Not a single parolee who had earned a four-year degree from an accredited academic institution went back to prison. In similar studies done around the country the recidivism rate is always around one percent. Ending the most effective rehabilitative program for the sole purpose of looking "tough" must be the dumbest prison policy decision ever made. Weighing the costs, in light of the success rate, shows this is truly a program that pays for itself.

5. Reward positive behavior. This is really the heart of the matter and the crux of the problem. For a variety of reasons that aren't worth rehashing, all the carrots were removed and the sticks were sharpened. The past 25 years were all about the punitive and the retributive inside the prisons. The best way I can illustrate how profound this has altered the experience of prisoners is by relating the reactions of youngsters in here. They often believe I'm exaggerating what it was like in a California prison, program-wise, back when I started 34 years ago. When I tell them the local fast-pitch softball teams, in real uniforms, came in to play our team, in their own real uniforms, every weekend during the season, or how every Saturday and Sunday college professors walked in through the gates to teach courses to eager men, or even how every December the canteen sold eggnog and candy canes, there are looks of disbelief. More to the point, when I tell them how it was possible to earn time off your sentence for an old concept called "good behavior," there is a sense that the years have gotten to me and my brain's gone soft. But here's what matters most about all of this reminiscing – the recidivism rate back then was around 24%; today, after all these years of pummeling us, it's more than 70%.

How would prison change if these five simple ideas were implemented?

Prisoners would look, and feel, a little more like human beings, be a part of the community, able to benefit from and perform valuable and needed work, have the option of expanding their minds through education, and be rewarded for doing the right things. None of this is a bad deal, for anyone, on either side of the fence, except those who have profited from the mass incarceration of far too many men, women and children.

Let's be honest about the grand experiment in punitive corrections over the past quarter of a century – it was a failure. All the promises of scaring miscreants straight, of making prisons so miserable that no one would dare to come back, of stomping the bad right out of us, failed to materialize. Instead, brutalizing people, dehumanizing people, treating people with complete contempt resulted in more coming back to prison, not less. (Exactly what any of us on this side of the fence would have predicted.) It's time to admit this terrible failure, time to speak the truth.

As far back as 163 B.C., a Carthaginian slave-turned-dramatist named Publius Terentius Afer wrote:

Quisquam (sic) in carceribus (sic) quiescere potest.

Two millennia later, this aphorism is no less apropos. It's time we learn this lesson.

Author Bio: Kenneth E. Hartman has served 34 years of a life without the possibility of parole sentence in the California prison system. He is the founder and Executive Director of The Other Death Penalty Project, a national grassroots organization of prisoners seeking to end all forms of the death penalty, including life without the possibility of parole. He is also the editor and a contributor to the new, award-winning anthology, *Too Cruel, Not Unusual Enough*:

Versions of History?

What happens when we start revising history to make ourselves more comfortable? Jim Rigby offers a warning.



Music: The Cure for the Common Breakup

"Without a soundtrack, human interaction is meaningless." – Chuck Klosterman



A School, A Gun, and a Generation's Burden

Brian Shea reflects on violence in schools vs. his memories of years ago. And calls upon a new generation to find their own way.

6 days since we @ no gun or pain or any substitute, tough but no going back now!!! Apologies to my ever tolerant hubby Peadar O Meallain (who also quit 6 days ago!), I've been really bad humoured 😞

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Quitting Smoking Together... What Could Go Wrong?

When Peadar O'Meallain and his wife were both quitting smoking, he learned to say, "I love you even though I'm of absolutely no practical value to you at the minute."



What I Learned from Watching Men (Before I Became One)

In becoming a man, Dillan DiGiovanni realized this: "I am in charge of the guy I am."

In Search of Henry Grimes

Henry Cherry had been an addict and a ne'er do well, but the music of Henry Grimes went beyond support,