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Approximately 470 words

THE POWER OF WORDS:
HOW LOCKDOWN AND EMPATHY CAN INTERSECT

by

Dortell Williams

"America's on lockdown," reads the headlines. These are jarring words to prisoners across the land; completely inappropriate for a free society; touching a nerve for people suffering literal, long-term lockdown. In fact, that verbiage, extreme and punitive, traumatic as it is, should be limited to prisons where inhumane treatment is normalized. The use of the word is even more grating when associated with schools, where our young, innocent, most vulnerable attend. If anyone knows the real meaning of the word lockdown, it is the prisoner. To the prisoner, the word lockdown in the free sphere incites the empathetic refrain: "I wouldn't wish this on anyone." The reference is to being confined in an 8 X 12 cage* (think a small-sized bathroom) for 24 hours a day: No showers; no phone calls; no fresh air; no packages, and no canteen for weeks or even months -- with another human being sardined in with you --

no privacy, limited autonomy.

Lockdowns are extreme, and thank God, rare. Mass rebellions are typically triggered by some real or perceived injustice (and are what Martin L. King, Jr. called expressions of the voiceless). Other reasons for lockdowns are institutional power outages, computer failures, etc., which usually last a few days to a few weeks. The lesser extreme of a lockdown is the euphemism, "Modified program," which owns varying degrees of any of the elements of a lockdown. Solitary confinement is the most extreme of lockdowns.

Solitary could endure for years or decades. Solitary is the place where grown men cry at night, scream during the day -- and some commit suicide somewhere in the blur of the in-between. Personally, I've always disliked the term "lockdown" for free society. It doesn't belong in a society that hails itself as "the land of the free." Then again, with over 2.2 million souls on lockdown -- the vast majority of them mentally ill or people suffering from substance abuse disorder -- the whole notion of incarceration is counterintuitive.

As a Communication Studies scholar, I understand the underpinnings of language. The words any particular culture habituates tend to reveal the collective mindset. America has a particular penchant for the noun, war. As a verb, it is an aggressive, hostile, even destructive word. Consider the phrases "war on poverty," or "war on crime," or the latest, "war on drugs." Indeed, America is at war with itself. And up until the opioid crisis, with America's more empathetic response, the subjects of the war on crime have been American citizens -- the damage, the carnage vastly spread throughout urban America.

These are some of the folk inside who cry at night, scream during the day, -- and some commit suicide somewhere in the blur of the in-between.

Personally, I prefer phrases such as "shelter-in-place," and "stay-at-home order," which are really just strong advisements with many, many exceptions. Still, I empathize with the protestors who vehemently insist on getting on with their lives. Their rebellion gives democratic voice to a minority view. Stay-at-home orders, as luxurious as they may seem to the prisoner, are excruciating across the board.

As we say behind the razor wire, "I wouldn't wish this on anyone!"

* There is a dialectical tension between camps who define a cell as any receptacle with human amenities, such as a toilet or shelving; whereas a cage is any container where someone else controls the comings and goings of those involuntarily confined.