

THE STATE OF PRISONS AND PRISONERS IN AMERICA

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(CHARLIE WAS ASKED TO DELIVER A KEYNOTE SPEECH ON April 28th BUT WAS NOT ALLOWED TO ATTEND BY THE FLORIDA DOC)

My name is Charles Patrick Norman. I am a prisoner of war, a political prisoner of America's war on crime. I live in a world far different from the one you live in, but you may find that our worlds are becoming more and more alike. My words come to you from inside a maximum security prison. The warden refused my request to travel to New York to give my speech in person, even though I promised to return.

Let me take an informal survey, by a show of hands. If you are thirty-two years old or younger, please raise your hand. Now look around you at how many of the upraised hands you see. Thank you.

I ask that question for a reason. For those who raised their hands, I have been serving this life sentence for a murder I did not commit since before you were born. I have served your entire life, and over half of mine, in prison—one-third of a century.

If you did not raise your hand, take a moment and think how old you were and what you were doing 33 years ago, when I came to prison. Jimmy Carter was the American president. Jim Jones had not yet poisoned his followers in the Jonestown Massacre. Some of you were little children. Some of you were teenagers. Some were adults and had families—husbands, wives, sons, daughters.

Think about how your life has changed in the past 33 years, how different you are now from who you were then, and think about me as a man, a fellow human being with hopes and dreams, a 28-year old who woke up that Wednesday morning of April 5, 1978, never suspecting that was the last time he would awake in freedom, in his own bed, lying next to a woman who loved him.

I am 61 years old now, and have been in some of Florida's worst prisons over the last 33 years. I have endured and survived horrors you do not want to imagine. The corrupt prosecutor was thwarted in his efforts to electrocute me, but was overheard saying, "Norman will never survive a life sentence." I am determined to prove him wrong.

I am not the same person I was in 1978. I have changed. I have seen good men and bad men die, some easily, giving up the ghost, relieved to be free of this life at last. Others died hard, fighting to live and breathe, to stay a little longer in this world, but nevertheless, die they did, as each of us is destined to do one day.

You might ask, "what kind of person are you, Charlie?" As hard as it may be to believe, I am a better man now than I was then, better in virtually every way. Rather than allow the monolith of prison to crush and destroy me, I entered the flaming furnace and emerged, refined, purified, the base metals burned away, against all odds. I am stronger in mind and spirit, if not body. I refused to let them break me down, as they do to so many.

I am not the only one. Others, extraordinary women and men, have survived long imprisonments and emerged with their humanity intact. Even before his release from 27 years confinement, Nelson Mandela was one of my personal heroes. If he could do it, I could do it.

A dead man named Tex McClain told me once that we (prisoners) were defective, like automobiles that came out flawed from the factory, and each of us had been recalled to prison to be repaired. Imagine a long line of broken people on a conveyor belt entering a huge building, and another line of people being cast out on the other side.

The problem, said Tex, a chain gang philosopher who had served what seemed like an unimaginable twenty years at the time, was that when we got inside the factory—the prison—we weren't being repaired, but damaged worse. If we'd been thousands of cars with faulty transmissions or fuel lines returning to the factory, when we emerged we

were missing wheels, with sputtering engines and clouds of smoke coming out of the exhausts. If prisoners were cars, when they were released from the factory, many would run off the road and end up in the ditch, while others sped up and crashed into trees or veered across the double yellow line and hit some innocent drivers head on. Perhaps half could keep it in the lane, make it through all the stop signs, red lights, and obstacles in their paths, and make their way home. That's not a good statistic.

I once went on a tour of a General Motors factory in Detroit. The number of autoworkers on the assembly line amazed me, bolting on bumpers, attaching doors, doing their jobs quickly before the vehicles moved to the next stations. Now I see the modern auto factory assembly line on TV, but I see no humans. All I see are machines, robots, welding, bolting, assembling, like a futuristic scene from "Terminator."

Prison has changed in much the same way as our factories. When I came to Raiford, "The Rock," a notorious penitentiary in North Florida immortalized in "Cool Hand Luke," and other stories, the Florida prison population was only one-fifth what it is today. As bad as it was, Raiford was better than prison is today.

If life in prison can be called good, amidst the ever-present threats of being stabbed, raped, murdered, or shot, life in prison then was good for those who knew how to serve their time, to be strong, to mind their own business, to not get involved with drugs, alcohol, gambling, or loansharking, or other deathtraps guaranteed to bring men down. One could go to school, earn a high school equivalency diploma, study college correspondence classes, take vocational classes and learn a trade, take self-improvement programs to learn to be a better person, go to religious services, attend AA, learn how to create works of art to earn spending money through classes in arts and crafts, share relaxed visits on weekends with loved ones, behave themselves, and earn their release on parole. They could go home. The reality today is far different.

The war on drugs began our destruction. The cartels flooded our shores with cocaine, and found a willing market among our nation's youth. How do you convince a sixteen-year old inner city youth he should stay in school and get his high school diploma, hope to get a full-time job that pays above minimum wage and has healthcare benefits, when he can stand on a corner in the 'hood for a few hours and make a thousand dollars selling crack rocks? When he winds up in an adult prison in a year or two with a mandatory sentence, selling the same drugs he sold on the street that were provided by a corrupt guard, what message is he receiving? Crime pays. Over two million prisoners nationwide are receiving the same message.

Prisons began administering psychotropic drugs strong enough to stun a mule, chemical Tasers, resulting in prisoners looking like walking cadavers.

As the politicians cranked out harsher penalties for every type of crime, they had to fund a prison building boom to hold the backlog of convicts in jails. Build them, and they will fill them. Find people to work there.

The prison population doubled, tripled, quadrupled, quintupled. Society was no better for it. The poverty, economic conditions, joblessness and drugs that fueled the crime wave only got worse. No one thought to intervene with the children, the collateral damage, to divert them early on from the path to crime, addiction, and prison. It did not occur to the politicians that the money eventually spent to incarcerate the children after they became adult criminals could have paid for college educations. Instead, after getting shuffled through a failing foster care and juvenile justice system that inflicts even more damage, the courts ship the disadvantaged, drug-addicted youths off to prison for a decade or two.

Then came September 11, 2001. Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda entered our vocabulary. The Twin Towers fell. We went to war. The world will never be the same, and neither will the prison system.

We learned new words: Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo. Waterboarding. Rendition. I.E.D., TBI. It was only natural that the same labor pool that drew prison guards would be tapped to fill the increasing ranks of soldiers, sailors, and Marines. Guards joined the services, and the Reserves were called up. When they came back to the States, they were different, changed. The experience damaged them.

Is it any surprise that those involved in the Abu Ghraib prison brutality scandal were members of a West Virginia National Guard unit composed mostly of state prison guards? Apparently, they applied the lessons learned in their

prisons to the Iraqi detainees. Then we get the benefit of their experiences over there when they return to civilian life.

The prisons are filled to bursting. Like the auto factories in our economic heyday, production is up. And like the auto factories, it's hard to find any humans working there. The robots have taken over. At least, they act like robots. They have been trained to show little human emotion. As the conveyor belt whisks us along the line, the robots don't see humans. They see inventory, serial numbers, not names. My serial number is 881834. My human name is superfluous. Ask any ex-con you meet who has been free for twenty years what his prison number is, and he will rattle it off without hesitation.

How do we change the dysfunctional prison system? First we must change the "lock them up and throw away the key" mentality that dominates society's fears of crime and violence. We must close prisons, not fill them. We must stop using prisons as warehouses to store the poor, the homeless, the mentally ill, the addicted. We must stop dehumanizing the disadvantaged.

In today's prisons, the dehumanization process is complete. Strip someone of their humanity and you no longer have to treat them humanely. Dehumanize a group or race of people and you can commit genocide with a clear conscience. It's okay, they're not human.

Once someone has been dehumanized, how do you get them back, restore them to their human condition? That is a more difficult problem. All I can do is speak for myself, from my own experience, and perhaps provide some insight.

A good friend asked me recently, considering all that I've endured and suffered through over the past 33 years, how have I resisted the damage, maintained my character, integrity, and sanity in the face of this barbaric treatment? A lot of people, she says, marvel that I haven't thrown in the towel at this point. How have I been able to survive, seemingly unscathed, continuing to be creative and productive, writing, reading, educating myself, helping others? Able to share my thoughts with groups of people who have little conception of harsh prison realities beyond "*The Shawshank Redemption*" and "*The Green Mile*," without embarrassing myself or them? I did not do it alone.

It will take a book to fully explain how I became the man I am, but I can give you the short answer in one word—love. The act of loving and being loved—feeling and experiencing love in a world of hate has kept me alive, has helped me prosper, has kept me human, given me the strength and resolve to resist the corrosive effects of dehumanization that have eaten away at so many of my fellow prisoners, as well as the guards.

To love and be loved—that is to be human. I have been blessed to have felt the love of fellow humans. Love has protected me, guided me, inspired me to write, to reach out, to communicate with the outside world despite attempts by officials, who put me in solitary confinement for my writings, to silence me, to share my thoughts and feelings, to become a better man.

Over the past twenty-five years a succession of people from PEN have helped me, encouraged me, taught me things that have changed my life for the better, as they have done for countless other prison writers aspiring to have their voices heard above the din.

Beginning with the late Fielding Dawson, who became a true friend, Jackson Taylor, Susan Yankowitz, Bell Chevigny, Hettie Jones, William "Chip" Brantley, and the amazing Stephanie Riggio, have reached through the razorwire, extending their gifts of knowledge and love to me. They are people I have never met, yet I feel closer to some of them than I do to members of my own family. They have read my thoughts, my words on paper, and still they accepted me. That is love.

On a closer front, for the past eleven years, I have been loved by a remarkable woman who taught by her selfless example, committing herself to seeing me free. Without her love I would have been silenced, my voice unheard, and I would not be sharing my thoughts with you today. Libby Dobbin. Please applaud her for me.

For all that and much more, for the opportunity to remain human in the face of great opposition and adversity, to be one of you, I thank you and salute you. I ask only that you continue the fight, to help and love others—many who may seem unlovable—to save their lives, to reach out to those less fortunate than yourselves.

I include myself in that category. Although I remain strong, resolute in mind and spirit, if not body, it has been a long battle against the odds. I have incurred damages, and I am tired. Prison is a young man's game, and this old man is ready to go home.

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