

BROKEN PYRAMID OF TRAUMA

*HOW THE PRISON SYSTEM
PROMOTES RECIDIVISM*

KALEEM NAZEEM



Broken Pyramid of Trauma: How the Prison System Promotes Recidivism

Written by Kaleem Nazeem
kaleem@decarceratear.org

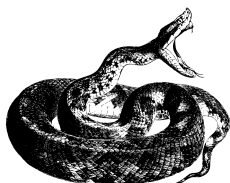
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BAG OF SNAKES MICROPRESS

“Trying to talk with people
about prisons is like trying to
hand them a ***bag of snakes***.
They won’t take it and they sure
don’t want to look inside.”

— Daniel Berrigan
Jesuit priest and anti-war activist

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Chapter 1
The Blueprint

“It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.”

— Nelson Mandela

In West Africa, one of the holiest duties within the tribe is that of a Griot. A griot is a West African historian who is a repository of oral tradition and is often seen as a leader due to their position as an advisor to royal personages. Their primary duty is to remember the tribe's history. From the age of adolescence, they are trained in the art of storytelling and memorization. However, they do not just tell the stories of the tribe's successes. They also recorded the hardships. This position is so important within the community, because they act as living documents of the community's history. I learned about Griots when I was incarcerated and came to appreciate their importance. If a community does not understand its history, it is more likely to repeat its hardships. I have also come to understand that when communities keep records of the crimes that were committed against them, they have a stronger position when holding people accountable for their behavior against their community.

For 28 years and 11 months the Arkansas Department of Corrections (ADC), and the people who were housed there, were my community and for the duration of my stay, I subconsciously became a Griot. I memorized the things that I and others endured. I recorded the inhumane treatment in my heart and I promised that if ever given the chance to testify and hold others accountable for their crimes against my community, I would view myself as a walking document of the things I endured and I would share our history through our collective stories. This booklet is not only a collection of the stories, it is an indictment on

the Arkansas penal system and how it treats those that are in their custody. It shows how, through their actions, they promote recidivism within the people who are under their control.

I have outlined my argument by using Maslow's Hierarchy of needs as a blueprint. By looking at the five needs and how prison damages people, I have come to understand a lot of the dysfunctions within the Arkansas Department of Corrections and how these dysfunctions affect both those who are incarcerated within the walls of the institution and those who are responsible for the dysfunctions. The argument will be made that the mistreatment of incarcerated individuals has a long-term effect on their ability to reintegrate back into society. If read with the proper spirit, this booklet can also be used by those who are causing the problem (harm) as a guidepost to correcting their ongoing behavior.

So, let's first address the issue of mass incarceration in Arkansas. Arkansas has an incarceration problem. It is plain for the whole world to see. We only have to look at the numbers and compare them to other states and nations. The table below shows an incarceration rate of 942 per 100,000 in April 2022. (including prisons, jails, immigration detention centers, and juvenile justice facilities), meaning that it locks up a higher percentage of its people than any democracy on earth. This includes Iceland, Norway, Netherlands, Denmark, Luxembourg, Italy, Belgium, France, Canada, Portugal, The United Kingdom, and The United States.

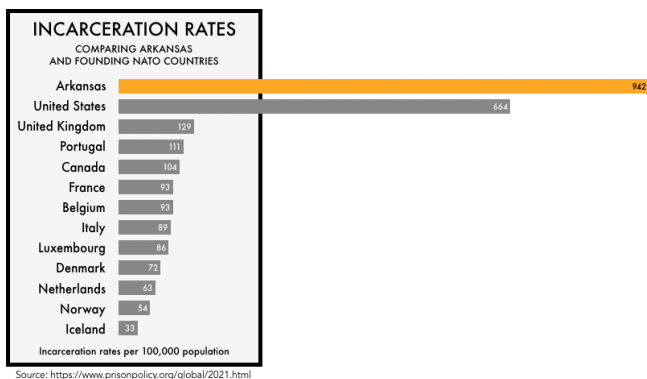


Figure 1: Incarceration Rate per 100,000 people in 2018;
<https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global2021.html>

The questions that we will be discussing in this booklet include why Arkansas has such a high incarceration rate and why the recidivism rate is so high. Since the passing of the 1994 crime bill (The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act), which was sponsored by then-President Bill Clinton and Senator Joe Biden, the Arkansas prison system has quadrupled. In 1994, Arkansas had 8 prisons that housed 10,000 prisoners. Now in 2022, it has over 17,000 prisoners. We must ask ourselves several questions when exploring the population growth of prisons. Is Arkansas more violent than other states to justify the prison growth, or is the state of Arkansas targeting marginalized people through its strict laws? Are Arkansas sentencing guidelines more strict when compared to other states? Is Arkansas more reactive instead of proactive when it comes to crime prevention?

When looking at the incarceration rate of Arkansas we must also look at the recidivism rate and what contributes to it.

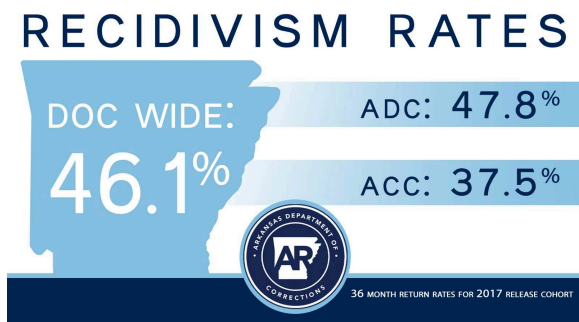


Figure 2: Arkansas Recidivism Rate 2017 (Most recent available); bit.ly/recidivismreport

There are many factors that contribute to whether a person re-offends or not. Contrary to popular belief, the majority of the reasons have nothing to do with the behavior of the individual and a lot to do with the treatment the individual receives when they are incarcerated. Also, the rate of recidivism has a lot to do with the policies that govern parole and probation. We will be looking at some of these policies that are implemented throughout the Arkansas penal system to give the layman a better understanding of what is taking place within the Arkansas penal system by exploring these policies from a more critical view. By the end of this pamphlet, we will see how the Arkansas Department of Corrections, the Arkansas State Legislature, and the laws they have passed, have inadvertently contributed to the incarceration and recidivism rate in Arkansas.

In 2001, Darrell Dennis was on parole. He had been on parole for over ten years. He had fallen through the cracks of the parole system. He had over 10 parole violations but was never sent back to the ADC. In 2018, he and two others kidnapped and killed an 18-year-old named Forrest Abrams. This led to the legislature passing a bill to revoke hundreds of people on parole for minor technical violations.

Parole revocations contribute to a backlog in county jails. Some laws have been passed that require people to do longer prison sentences. One such law is Act 895 of 2015, which states that if a person has a prior violent charge (no matter how long it has been since the charge) and is convicted of another violent crime, the person is required to do 100% of the sentence. A lot of the time, this is not explained when a person is in court, so they may take a plea deal for 15 years with an expectation of being released in 3-4 years with good time and good behavior. When they get to prison, the IPO (Institutional Parole Officer) explains the sentencing guidelines. This and other laws, like the gun enhancement law that was passed in 2020 (that states if you have a gun in your possession that you have to do 100% of the time if convicted), mean that parole is off the table. These are only some of the laws that contribute to the overcrowding of the prison system. From my experience and the stories that I have heard from other men and women, they come to prison expecting to serve a reduced sentence, however, they were not told about loopholes during the plea negotiations, which lengthens their sentence.

Is there a way that we can reduce the recidivism rate in Arkansas? As shown in Figure 2, Arkansas has a recidivism rate of 48% and the national average is 38%. I think in order to understand the recidivism rate in Arkansas, we must take a look inside the prison system and how the ADC operates when it comes to the treatment of incarcerated individuals. We will be exploring this by using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and how the denial of these needs adversely affects the people who are incarcerated. It would be easy to say that people who are incarcerated want to be there or have a propensity for criminality. However, I will show that the conditions of their confinement foster recidivism.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a universal theory that is used by many psychologists to explain the five basic human needs. These include basic physical needs, safety, community, esteem, and self-actualization (hopes and dreams). Maslow highlights how physical needs must be satisfied before social needs and social needs before self-fulfillment. To act unselfishly, a person must have met their most basic needs, an achievement that leads to growth and self-actualization. We will be reviewing this theory through the lens of incarceration. We will explore how people may recidivate if their needs are neglected.

When a person first comes to prison, he or she is most vulnerable and susceptible to change. They are in a strange environment, do not know anyone, and are operating from stereotypes about prison. They have been kicked out of the

world and are questioning their life decisions. The world as they knew it changed and they will have to make changes to survive this new experience. This is the time when the administration has the most sway over the direction that their rehabilitation goes. However, for the most part, the administration misses this opportunity.

For example, prison systems could develop some kind of personalized treatment program, could administer mental health evaluations, and could provide educational programming. Unfortunately, this is not the direction the ADC takes. Instead, they further exacerbate the problem by being punitive. Instead of uplifting people in their humanity, they take them through a process of dehumanization. This dehumanization is both physical and psychological. The first thing that you are given and then robbed of when entering prison is your name. You are told that you are an inmate, a convict, or another pejorative to make you feel less than others. Instead of being respectful to you as a person and addressing you as Sir/ Ms., you are told to remember a number. If you are not able to remember this number, you will receive a disciplinary. However, the process of your socialization to prison has just begun, because you are then physically dehumanized. You are required to take off all your clothes in front of other human beings. It depends on the size of the group that is going through this intake with you on how many people are there. While in this group, you are taken through a ritual of humiliation bending over and spreading your butt cheeks and having to stand

in a line naked with other individuals where you are then doused with lye and given a cold shower. After all this, you are then placed in a 6"x9" cell. The administration will not call this solitary confinement, but it is. This will be your first experience with solitary confinement because you will spend the majority of your day in this cell and there will be limited interaction with others. For the next several weeks, you go through the intake process which consists of different IQ and aptitude tests. You are also evaluated by the medical staff to determine what job assignment you will be given. According to your age and physical health, you will be assigned to your Parent Unit. This will become your primary unit for your incarceration. The above process is the process that the majority of people go through who enter the ADC.

Chapter 2

Physical Needs

*Our three most basic needs are
food, shelter, and water*

“Humans needed water or they
would die, but dirty water killed as
surely as thirst...”

— Neal Stephenson

Our most fundamental needs are our physical needs, which consist of our access to food, shelter, and water. Without our physical nourishment, we would cease to exist. When incarcerated, this need is pretty much being provided for you, even though you have no choice as to the nourishment, clothes, or shelter that will be provided. Every morning that you wake, no thought process goes into what you will wear that day. Everyone is given the same standard white uniform. Any colors are forbidden. You do not even have the luxury of deciding what the room temperature will be or what food to put on your plate. All these basic necessities and the ability to govern yourself are taken from you and delegated to someone else. The State tries to make each individual into an automaton. There is no promotion of individuality, and when individuals try to use creative ways to carve out their individuality, the administration bans it. For years it was against the rules for incarcerated men to grow their facial hair and the hair on their heads. The only shoes that are allowed are the ones that are sold on the unit commissary. Cosmetic materials like cologne and perfume are banned from the prison, not for security reasons, but because small things like this differentiate one individual from another.

One of the first things you learn as a human being is to eat or allow yourself to be fed. Your mother or primary caregiver makes sure you obtain subsistence so you can develop into a healthy person.

In prison, one of the first things you learn is to eat or tolerate the food that is given to you. We have all heard horror stories about the quality of the food that is served in prison. These stories are true. When I came to prison and experienced the quality of the food, I had a problem eating it. For the first couple of years, I tried to live off the unit commissary. This worked until my family was not able to send me money weekly. One day, after having worked in the hot sun all day, I and a close friend of mine were sitting at the same table. He was eating his food and I was looking at mine. Jo-Jo had been locked up for about 10 years at this time, so his palate had become numb to the taste of prison food. I can not remember what the exact meal was, but he gave me some advice that allowed me to survive almost 29 years of incarceration. Jo-Jo looked at me and said, "Don't eat for the taste, eat to get full." Our society should never place human beings in a position where they have to only eat to get full. After he made the statement, he didn't wait for my response or even stop to look at me. He just resumed eating his meal and I did the same.

When I think about the food that is served in the prison, I must disavow the general public from the notion that the prison population is eating things like Salisbury steak, chicken alfredo, or other cuisines. When you read the menu that is placed on the website, you would think that the meals are suitable, however, the majority of these meals are processed box meals or cooked with spoiled meats and low-quality vegetables. If you have ever spent time on a farm or raised pigs, you know that the farmers will feed the

pigs all the scraps and leftovers. When someone is placed on behavioral control within the ADC, they are fed a meal (if you can call it that) called gruel. It consists of all the leftovers from the previous day, combined in a big cauldron and cooked down to a mush. Cornmeal is then mixed in and then it's placed in a sheet pan and cooked in the oven until it is hardened. When it is cooled, it is cut into squares, wrapped in plastic, and served to the people on behavioral control three times daily. No other nourishment is given to the individual other than water. The duration of time they spend on this meal depends on the individual's future behavior. All of these practices which justify treating human beings like animals are allowed by Arkansas Department of Corrections policy.

We must also take into consideration that when we talk about behavioral control (which is another name for solitary confinement), we are talking about people with severe mental health problems. Their punishment for having these mental health issues is starvation or food deprivation. This deprivation only makes their mental state more fragile. Even though the whole prison population is not fed gruel, I am of the opinion that the lesser of us should be treated like the best of us. When this kind of behavior is ignored, it opens up the door for more mistreatment. I can remember many times when I was working in the prison kitchen. Sometimes, when the meat came in, it would be spoiled and instead of throwing it away, the supervisor would still require us to cook it. Even after being cooked, it would still smell

spoiled. The supervisor would then have the cook make a gravy to pour over the spoiled meat to mask the smell. The only thing that the guys who were incarcerated could do was inform their friends that the meat was spoiled and not to eat it. Some would write grievances, but the administration would respond back saying that the grievance had no merit. Challenging the supervisor would lead to you receiving a disciplinary and being placed in solitary confinement.

Another universal physical need is shelter. The shelter that human beings are being housed in must be adequate. When I first went to prison, we were housed in a warehouse-style building. There were approximately 100 individuals housed in the same barracks. There was no air conditioning and only one fan per barrack, with minimum heat in the winter months. We were packed into one barrack, like sardines, and forced to endure the summer heat and winter cold the best we could. Guys would get frustrated in the summer months and knock all the windows out in an attempt to get some air in the building, only to have to endure the mosquitoes during the night. They would sleep on the floor in front of the fan attempting to get any air possible and protection from the mosquitoes. The winters were brutal in a different way; because of the windows being knocked out in the summer, you were at the mercy of the winter elements. You were only issued one blanket. This led to individuals taking the blankets of weaker people. The administration turned a blind eye to all of this.

This is what the general population looked like; solitary confinement/administrative segregation was much worse. Imagine living in a 6'x9' cell for 23 hours of the day, 7 days a week, having nothing. And when I say nothing, I'm talking about not having some of the bare essentials that we in the free world take for granted (toothbrush, comb, hair brush, television, reading books, and privacy). In solitary confinement, you are only given one jumpsuit, two sheets, and a blanket. You can only take a 10-minute shower 3 times a week. Then, the officers will sometimes become very vindictive. The games they play when they get bored include spraying mace in the vents. In the winter they will take the storm doors off of the vents so the cold air can get in. In the summer they will turn all the fans off. Then you have to deal with the constant noise of people screaming or crying out for attention (only to be ignored). Most of the time, individuals with mental health issues find themselves being housed in solitary confinement, where these conditions only worsen their illness. As if this was not enough, they will place another individual in this small space and tell them that they will have to live together for an extended period of time. When in prison there is no sense of privacy, but when you're living in close quarters with another, all privacy is lost.

Then, the water must be addressed. I have never been to a unit where there was not some issue with the water. When you are in prison, you learn to adjust to the unadjustable; you learn to block out your senses and close sections of your mind to blank out parts of your

reality. For if you do not adjust, you will not survive. Each unit has its unique set of problems. At one unit, the water was so bad that each year there was a staph infection breakout. The water was so bad, the health department had to quarantine the unit. When I first went to the unit, it took me about two weeks before I could drink the water. It smelled like feces. Then when you showered, it felt like there was a film left on your body; no matter how much soap you used, the film still remained. In other units, you could see the discoloration in the water. When guys used to get a new set of clothes, we held on to them as long as we could, because we knew that if we sent them to the laundry they would come back looking dirtier than when we sent them. The uniforms would also go in looking white but when they are washed, they would come back looking brown—the more they were washed, the browner they became. We must also take into consideration that the same water was used to cook the food. I used to sometimes ask myself how the water is affecting my health. However, I never allowed myself to ponder on that question too long, because I was in a captive environment — one that had no mercy for such pondering and no solutions for any health problems that I may discover. So I and others learned to compartmentalize our rational thoughts, justifiable paranoia, and fear of the long-term health consequences of the water and our overall condition. This was part of the survival technique that we developed at that moment. I attribute the neglect and suppression of the physical needs of prison inhabitants to the high recidivism rate.

I would now like to use one of *Aesop's Fables* to hone in on a point that I would like to make. A boy stole sweets from his schoolmates. His mother found out. She didn't beat him or even tell him off. Later he stole money, and again, she said nothing. When the boy grew up, he became a professional thief. In the end, he was caught and sentenced to be hanged. As he stood on the gallows, he caught sight of his mother, weeping among the crowd. He asked permission to speak to her before he died, and she was brought to the gallows. He leaned towards her as if to whisper in her ear, and bit her ear right off. She screamed in pain. The thief was restrained. As the rope went around his neck, he shouted, "Mother, you have killed me; for if you had beaten me when I was younger, I would never have become a thief."

In some ways, the ADC is like the mother in this story, and the incarcerated individuals represent the boy. When a person comes to prison and their primary needs are neglected, the behavior that led them to prison only metastasizes. Instead of teaching the individual how to healthily take care of their primary needs, the ADC ignores that responsibility and handicaps the individual. In the long run, if this is ignored willingly or unwillingly, it creates a sense of discontentment toward society or the institution — in this case, the prison system and the people who implement the rules that govern it. People do not take pleasure in having their responsibilities as human beings denied. However, through the process of incarceration, this inevitably happens. It is also inevitable that the incarcerated individual will foster a strong

resentment or sense of discontent when they realize that a lot of their hardship could have been prevented if given the proper information. This resentment and discontent will show up in many ways. Sometimes, the response to this oppression will be physical. Other times it will show up as microaggressions that will be very passive-aggressive. Then, you have the verbal responses. When you hear people make statements like, "Don't treat me like a child!" or, "I'm a grown-ass man/woman! Talk to me as such." This is only an attempt to be validated and recognized as a human being. We must look at all of the things that I have outlined above and think about the destructive impact that the neglect of our basic needs has on the individuals who are incarcerated, because it shows up when the individual is released. We must also understand that no matter who you are or how long your sentence of incarceration was, no one will leave prison unchanged. However, the ones who endure a longer-term prison sentence will have a more detrimental impact inflicted on their ability to reintegrate back into society. They will be required to take care of themselves and their basic needs — needs that have not been independently satisfied for an extended period of time. The task of self-governing can be hard for some, because they are operating on a conditioned mentality that was fostered by the prison system. Therefore, when individuals leave prison operating out of this conditioned mentality, they are ripe for recidivism. When looking at the mistreatment or neglect of the ADC toward the incarcerated individual, we should not be surprised when we see individuals biting off the ear of society.

Chapter 3

Safety Need

*Our need to feel that the world is
organized and predictable*

**“If you put good people in bad
systems you get bad results.
You have to water the flowers
you want to grow.”**

— Stephen Covey

It is critical that people feel safe in their environment. Safety promotes an optimistic attitude toward life. This is conducive to positive growth and creative thinking. When we are in a safe environment, we do our best. We can explore ourselves and through that have a healthier relationship with those around us. We look at the prison system and ask, "Is there a sense of safety?" We would only have to look from the physical perspective in answering this question: the answer is NO. When we think about safety, it's not only a physical condition, but also a mental and emotional one. Prison inflicts a great deal of psychological violence and because it is not readily visible, we as a society sometimes overlook the destructiveness of it. Do sheep feel safe surrounded by lions? Does a bird feel safe and free confined to a cage? Or do they feel fearful and suppressed? When a person or animal is placed in a hostile environment, that person or animal can never feel safe. When faced with fearful situations, people sometimes freeze and try to mimic their surroundings. It's one of our innate defense systems. We see this in the animal kingdom when we look at the chameleon. It adapts to its environment and tries to become invisible. The same is true with a lot of people in prison. Prison is a hostile environment that is void of any real sense of safety. People who do not have a true propensity for violence will mimic the behavior of those around them to place themselves in a position of safety. There is an old saying in the prison system that goes, "In order not to be eaten by the beast, you have to sit at the table with him." While you may not be a beast, you have to give the appearance of one

to avoid being devoured by those who are. However, prolonged exposure to an abnormal environment sometimes destroys or retards the true character of the individual. This is one of the falsehoods of the penal system. Prison is a chaotic environment and it forces people to adopt chaotic rules of survival. In some cases, it makes criminals out of people who did not have that level of criminality within them before being exposed to the system. In others, it exposes them to a deeper sense of their humanity.

Civilized societies are governed by a body of rules and institutions that make everyone feel safe and secure. We have institutions like hospitals, police stations, child protective services, etc. There are laws that govern the general public. These are our agreed-upon expectations of others so that we can have a sense of order within our communities. These institutions and laws foster a sense of overall safety. We do not have to operate out of a state of fear for the majority of our lives. The inequalities within society give birth to criminality. As long as inequality exists, there will always be crime. Nevertheless, the checks and balances that we have in place give us the ability to hold onto the overall sense of security. However, the opposite is true about prison. The institution and rules governing it are set up to dehumanize inhabitants and make them feel other than human.

When I was a kid, we used to watch the epic mini-series, *Roots*. I remember always asking myself why the people didn't run or rebel

against the conditions of slavery. I can remember saying to others when talking about the series that I would have rebelled or escaped. The depictions of slavery that the series showed were something I knew I would not be able to endure.

I have already shared how dehumanizing the intake process was when I first went to prison. The first thing I remember is when I was going to my parent unit. We were traveling down a long stretch of road. As we drove, the only thing that you could see for miles was rows of cotton. As we started getting closer to the unit, you could see in the field these little black dots. However, the closer we got, I realized these were people in the fields picking cotton. There were white men on horseback with shotguns overseeing them. The black men picking cotton wore a look of subjugation.

When I took in the totality of my surroundings and where I was in the great scheme of things, I couldn't help but think about a lot of my childhood thoughts as I watched the *Roots* mini-series. At that moment, I said to myself, "Damn, they got me!" I knew at that moment that all the horrors I saw in the cinematic productions and the unsaid things that came along with oppression and the subjugation of a human being would now be my lived experience. I didn't know how to express the emotions that I was feeling at that moment. Everything I saw mirrored slavery. You had mostly black men picking cotton and white men overseeing on horseback. It was as if time had reverted back to the Antebellum South. Even the sound that

you heard in the fields was a relic of the past. When we talk about safety, we must look at the prison system in its overall condition. And that condition must be juxtaposed against Antebellum slavery.

I would now like to take this time and tell you a story about when I felt the most fearful.

Is there such a thing as safety in prison? As we talk about safety in prison, or the lack thereof, I would like to reflect on the time when I was the most fearful. It was not when I was assaulted and stabbed over ten times by another incarcerated individual. When that incident took place, I was in total defensive mode. I did not have the time or luxury to be fearful and think about the danger I was in. My adrenaline was so high that I didn't even feel the pain of the stab wounds that were being inflicted upon my body. Today, I still look at my body and reflect on the blessing of survival. I know that being here is a blessing, because there was a hidden hand that facilitated my survival. I know that man had nothing to do with me being able to endure my incarceration, because even as this incident was taking place, no officer intervened on my behalf. They were all silent witnesses to what could have been my death, and their presence was only for documentation. I know that the stories that I share are testimonies of survival, whether mental, spiritual, or physical. I had to fight my way out of that situation. I will not pretend to be this guy who looked death in the eyes and laughed or didn't flinch. I did both, and every time after, it shook my whole being to the core of my soul. I still have nightmares of

what I saw and all the things that were not done. Early in my incarceration, I became totally disillusioned with the false sense of security and safety that the officers who ran the prison provided. This disillusionment came when I experienced my most frightening moment in prison.

Before I go into the story, I have to give the reader an overview of the prison and what was going on in the environment. It was the early 90s, and at this time, the Arkansas Department of Corrections (Cummins Unit) was still housing approximately 100 individuals together per barracks. For the most part, there were no adequate ventilation systems within the barracks, and there was no central air conditioning. The most dangerous part of the barracks was the fact that the ADC allowed incarcerated individuals to have hobby craft tools within the barracks. All the tools that an individual had were stored within the barracks, tools like scissors, razors, bevel knives, hammers, sewing awls, etc. The only requirement to having these tools was to place your name on the hobby craft list and wait to be selected. There was no oversight of the tools by the officers, and in each barracks, you may have had two or three hobby craft booths. I believe I was in my fourth year of incarceration when this incident happened. Mike Banks, a guy I had befriended years earlier, and I were in the same barracks together. Just about every day we ran together. When you saw one of us, you would see both of us. We were housed in the opposite barracks from where the incident happened, but the barracks were arranged so

that if you are in the opposite barracks, you can see everything that is going on in the other. That's part of the nature of prison; there is no such thing as privacy. By this time, I had seen plenty of violence, enough to make me always be conscious and cautious of my surroundings.

It all started in the recreation yard. I have no idea what the altercation was about, but I saw a guy named Spanky slap another guy named LuLu. Spanky and his friend were laughing about it. He made several threats toward him. I didn't see Lulu respond in any way. He accepted what Spanky had done, and at that moment, I thought his response was weak. I also thought that was the end of it. I had seen this kind of behavior throughout the institution, and it wasn't uncommon to see someone getting slapped. The officers also witnessed the incident and disregarded it. They waved it off and told Spanky to get off it and return to the barracks. This was also common behavior on the officers' part. If the two individuals did not have a back-and-forth exchange, then they felt a verbal admonishment was enough. This would keep them from having to write a written report. I learned early on that anything officers could do to reduce the paperwork that they had to do, they did it, even if it caused them to put the safety of others at risk.

We all went back to the barracks, and everyone that had witnessed the slap thought that was the end of it. Mike and I were in the same barracks, and Lulu, Spanky, and Spanky's friend were in the barracks across the hall. There were not any more incidents that day. At 10:00 pm, everyone

was required to get on their bunk. The lights in the barracks never went out, but 10:00 pm was considered the time that everyone was expected to go to sleep. Lulu was one of the guys that had a hobby craft card and with that came access to hobby craft tools. I don't know what made me and Mike stay up that night (my bunk and his bunk were beside each other). It had to be around 2:00 am when we witnessed Lulu get out of the bed and walk to Spanky's friend's bunk, and while he was still asleep, he used one of the hobby craft tools that he had and cut his throat. Mike and I were shocked as we looked on. When the friend realized his throat was cut, he had the energy to stumble to the gate as he was bleeding out. There was so much blood. We knew that he would die from the wound. Amidst our shock and attempts to process what we had seen, we lost sight of Lulu. While the officer was panicking and trying to open the gate so that Spanky's friend could get to the infirmary, LuLu made it to Spanky's bunk. He was also sound asleep, however, Spanky would not be as lucky as his friend was. Lulu proceeded to climb on top of him as he slept and began to stab him. We watched him stab Spanky over two hundred times with the hobby craft tool he had. Nearly 20 officers ran into the barracks and saw what was happening. There was no attempt to make Lulu stop stabbing Spanky. They all stood there as Lulu continued to stab Spanky. After he was exhausted from his task of stabbing Spanky, he climbed off his lifeless body and walked out of the barracks into the main hall. I still remember how both his arms were drenched in Spanky's blood, to the point where it was dripping on the floor.

Everyone who had witnessed the stabbing knew that Spanky was dead. When Lulu made it to the hallway, the officers still didn't do anything. He stood in the middle of the hall for a minute, dropped the knife he used, and placed his hands behind his back.

This is only one example of how the prison system and officers do not do their due diligence to protect the individuals who are incarcerated. This is a fear that incarcerated people have to live with. After the shock of seeing a man getting murdered in his sleep (and the response of the officers) had worn off, Mike and I realized that if we ever were in a similar situation, there would be no help from the officers. We made each other a promise to always protect one another. I find myself always thinking about the what-ifs of the above story. There is a lot to unpack, but what if the officers had done their jobs when Spanky slapped Lulu? What if the ADC did not allow hobby craft tools within the barracks? What if the officers would have intervened instead of standing around while Lulu stabbed Spanky? Prison is fundamentally dangerous, however, those who are given the responsibility of protecting the prison population should perform their duties when called upon.

What happens when you're faced with the people who are supposed to protect you, but they are promoting all the symbols of racism and categorizing you into a subordinate position? Cotton is emblematic of slavery. Never have I felt more oppressed and fearful than when I was confronted, assaulted, and locked up for refusing to pick cotton. The below

story is to highlight how the administration promotes a sense of helplessness, exploitation, and fear. I have always said that I would not pick cotton. The historical significance of how my ancestors were forced into slavery on plantations throughout the south would not allow my constitution to pick cotton. When you are in prison, you try to run from the thought of being in the conditions of slavery. You try to compartmentalize this reality and place it in a part of your mind that is not readily seen. However, you rarely outrun this reality. Every time I had a run-in with Mr. Cotton, every time I saw him, his truth always smashes against the paper-thin façade of falsehood that I construct to shield me against the razor edge of reality. Truth, no matter how ugly it may be, always wins. So every time we met, I decided I would rather go to the hole than pick cotton.

It was a common practice at the Varner Unit that when you refuse work, you get sent to the sally port and placed in the bullpen all day. Then, at the end of the day, you would be sent to isolation (the hole) and receive a disciplinary infraction.

After informing the officer that I was not going to work, this is where I was sent. About an hour later, the sergeant pulled up in the truck and told me to get in the back. I informed him that I was not going to work. He told me again to get in the back of the truck. After refusing a second time, he placed me in handcuffs and physically put me in the truck. Every time he started the truck, I would jump off and state, "I ain't picking no damn cotton."

He got out of the truck, threatened me, and then placed me back in the truck. We went through this routine about three times. I knew he was mad, because after the second time, his face was crimson red and his verbal threats were venomous. I was stalwart in my attitude about picking cotton.



Photographed by Bruce Jackson at Cummins Prison Farm, 1972

After the third time, he handcuffed me to the bumper in the middle of the truck bed. When he was sure that I could not jump off, he started driving. I noticed when pulling away from the sally port that we were moving away from the other incarcerated people who were already in the fields at this time. The situation was about to get twisted. For 15 minutes, we drove down an isolated dirt road. I started to fear for my life. I knew that it would have been easy for them to kill me and justify the act by saying I tried to escape or manufacture some other lie. Everyone knew that the fields were run by racist, white officers. As we drove down this

long dirt road, I said a silent prayer asking for protection against what was coming. When we came to a stop, there was another truck. I saw Major Gibson and the captain waiting.

Everyone called him Red Beard, because he was a big man and his facial hair was red. We were at the end of the field in the middle of nowhere. The sergeant called to me to get out of the truck. When I got out, the major asked, "What's this shit about you not working?" I told him I don't pick cotton, but before I finished the word cotton, he hit me in the face. I swung back and we exchanged several blows until I was overwhelmed by all three of them.

After they got their punches and kicks in, they let me up off the ground. Needless to say, my anger was now at the point of unbridled hatred. No rationale could justify their actions. I had no protection against my hatred. It was as if I had fallen through an abyss, where my hatred for my oppressors fueled my anger, and my anger fueled my survival. I know they were attempting to break me. A paradoxical feeling came over me. At once, I needed to win, and at the same time, I welcomed death, because I did not cherish the thought of living under such unjust conditions.

I assumed they saw my resolve not to submit to their browbeating tactics. The major's approach to my resolve was to ask me, "Why did you make us do that?" I replied to him saying, "I didn't make you do shit. I ain't picking no damn cotton." He responded, "Well you don't have to pick cotton. We just want you out here." I was

then taken to where other prisoners were picking cotton and all morning I stood in the field. When we came in for lunch, I made plans to stab the major when hoe-squad turned out that evening.

I knew I could get a shank from this old guy named Parker. He had shown me a nice one just a week before. He was trying to sell it. I didn't have any need for it at the time, so I passed on it. I sent word to him that I needed to talk to him and to meet me on the back dock. I didn't even go to the barracks, because I knew that if I would have gone inside the building, I wouldn't have been able to get back out. Parker was a trustee and could move freely through the prison. He came out and asked me what I needed. I told him what happened and how I was going to handle it. He tried to talk me out of it, but I wasn't having any of it. So when he left, he left with the promise of bringing me the shank, with the agreement that I pay him. I waited on the back dock.

The back dock is significant, because everyone has to pass the back dock when entering or leaving the prison. All the police come out of the back dock fifteen minutes before they call for hoe-squad. I planned to sneak up on the major as they were coming out and stab him. Parker never came back. He sent a brother named Malik out, who he knew I respected. Malik was one of two brothers that I had respect for when I was at Cummins. I lost a lot of respect for older dudes in prison because of their behavior and attitudes toward younger guys, who they often sexually assaulted.

So I developed a strong disdain for them and found myself jumping on them for the smallest infractions. Malik was different. He was a brother who stood on principles, and I never saw him compromise himself for nothing or no one. Parker had already told Malik what I told him. So, Malik came to offer a more rational solution. He told me that if I stabbed the major, they would kill me on the back dock. He advised me to go to Assistant Warden Emmitt; everyone called him Soul Pig. He was a black warden and he had an open-door policy. So I took it to Soul Pig. He allowed me to sit in his office and explain to him what happened that morning. When I got through talking he asked me, "What do you want me to do?" At that moment, I understood exactly what he was saying. He was saying that I was asking him to take the word of a prisoner over these high-ranking officers. I told him, "I don't want you to do shit. I was only letting you know what kind of shit they had going on in the field. If a person doesn't want to pick cotton, there's a process in place to deal with that and it does not include taking guys to the back of the cotton fields and assaulting them."

After I made this statement, he told me to go to the barracks and don't worry about going back out until I heard from him. This is exactly what I did. Every day after this incident, when they called hoe-squad, I didn't even go to the sally port. I didn't go to hoe-squad for three months straight. At the end of the three months, they did a major shakedown. When they searched the building, all the field officers came in to assist. When they came into my barracks, Major

Gibson made it his personal business to search my property. When he came across *Soledad Brothers* by George Jackson, he said, "So this is what you've been reading?" I was surprised that he knew about this book, which was a challenge and counterargument to his mentality. I didn't even respond. He asked me when I would return to work. I just looked at him, and he threw the book on my bunk, then moved on to harass someone else. A week later, I went before classification and was given a job inside the building. I never talked to Assistant Warden Emmitt about the situation again, however, I appreciate how he handled the situation on his end because it was better than my plan. I highlighted the above two stories to show where, on both ends of the spectrum, the administration destroys any sense of safety when individuals are incarcerated. There is a lot to unpack in both stories, but the general idea is that someone can not feel safe when people in positions of authority neglect to uphold their responsibility to maintain a safe environment. For the most part, when you don't do something that a guard wants you to do, you are met with some kind of physical punishment, whether it's being placed in solitary confinement (protocol) or being assaulted (the informal punishment).

Attitudes that are considered antisocial in a free society are not only expected but promoted in prison. Empathy, concern, trust, and love are emotions that are taboo and have limited space to grow in prison. An emotional problem is expected to be isolated within oneself. To express emotions outwardly constitutes a sign

of weakness. Hatred, vengeance, manipulation, and selfishness are the emotions that are encouraged and given free space to breathe in prison. Combine this with all the double standards that the administration promotes and you have complete instability. When a person is subjected to this for an extended period of time, the spirit becomes callous and the sense of safety is lost. When people are forced to defend themselves daily, is it a surprise that a lot of individuals who are incarcerated come home more damaged (in their lack of respect for authority and being hyper-aggressive) than when they were initially incarcerated? While in prison, both responses to this environment keep the individual safe and are considered normal responses. Nevertheless, when these situations are transferred to the general public, they are considered deviant behaviors, which increases the chance of recidivism. It's hard to believe that there can exist a community in such a state of chaos. This brings us to the third category in Maslow's Hierarchy of Community Needs.

Chapter 4
Community Needs

The need to belong and feel loved

**“The greatness of a community
is most accurately measured
by the compassionate actions
of its members.”**

— Coretta Scott King

The more we progress and develop, the more people play a part in our development. When we are developing and operating from a healthy perspective, we have healthy and positive relationships with our peers. However, when we are in a dysfunctional environment (which all prisons are), we find ourselves surrounded by negative influences. If the predominant mentality is negative, that negativity will harm the strongest of people. I once heard a statement that if you stay at the barbershop long enough, you will get a haircut. This line of thinking is also true when faced with the conditions of prison. I will explain this in detail later. I think that if we are to understand the destabilizing effect that the prison environment can have on a person's natural development, I must first explain how the administration treats the individuals who are incarcerated. As I stated above, when someone first comes to prison, they are at their most susceptible level to change. They are in a new environment, do not know what to expect, and, for the most part, are reviewing their lives and do not like where their choices have landed them.

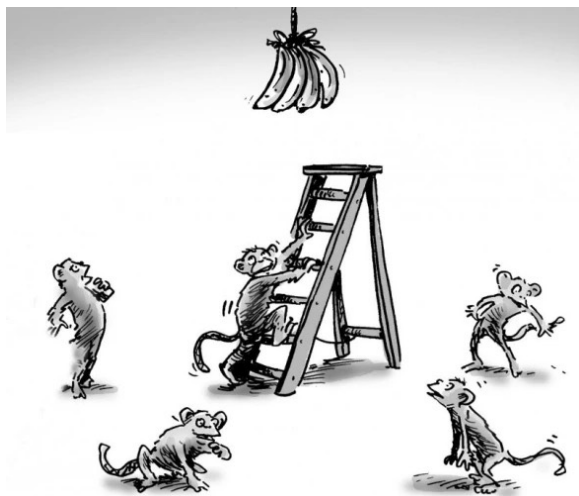
Any new information to help them survive this experience would be welcomed. If given the opportunity to examine their life and given the proper tools to explore the underlying issues that were the catalyst to their incarceration, they would welcome them. If only the administration would place rehabilitation on the front end of their sentence. Not only would the individual be better served, but it would also change the culture of prison. However, what usually

happens to people who have long-term sentences is that the administration crams all of the programs on the back end of a sentence. This only makes the individual enter any program with the wrong energy. As the system operates now, a person with 6 or more years left on their sentence is not eligible for any rehabilitative programs. So you have people who have sat in prison for many years without addressing any of their issues. This is the communal environment that the administration promotes.

Additionally, the administration places barriers on individuals who are trying to self-educate. There are policies in place that restrict the number of books that a person can have (up to 10). Then they have certain books that are on the banned list. For the most part, the most targeted books include African and African American literature. Anything that promotes self-worth and individualized growth and development is considered a threat to the administration. In the ADC mission statement, they claim to be about helping individuals rehabilitate, however, they actively promote the opposite.

I stated that if rehabilitative programming was given on the front end of the individual's sentence that it would change the culture of prison. Information has a way of shining light into the dark corners of the mind. Most individuals become criminals or participate in criminal activities, not because they have a propensity for crime, but because of life circumstances. However, when presented with

new information, they will make better choices. Nevertheless, ignorance and dysfunction dim the light of intelligence. This is what we see operating on the part of the Administration.



A group of scientists got together and conducted an experiment with five monkeys. They placed them in a cage. In the middle of the cage they placed a ladder. On top of the ladder, they placed bananas. Every time one of the monkeys climbed to get the bananas, the rest of the monkeys were soaked with cold water. After a while, the monkeys beat up the one who went up the ladder. Before long, no monkey dared go up the ladder regardless of the temptation. The scientists decided to substitute one of the monkeys. The first thing the new monkey did was go up the ladder, and immediately, the rest of the monkeys beat him

up. After several beatings, the new monkey learned not to climb the ladder even though he had never been soaked. A second monkey was substituted and the same thing occurred, with the first monkey participating in the beating. The process continued until all the monkeys were replaced, and the beatings continued, even though none of the monkeys had ever received a cold shower.

The Arkansas Department of Corrections participates in the physical and psychological beatings of individuals who are incarcerated. We see this in many of the policies and practices. I will take this time to explain some of them. It's imperative that we examine some of these practices in the context of community because, as with any community, the ones who are in charge set the tone for the overall behavior of the community. When the new officers go through the training academy, which every new officer is required to go through, they are taught how to treat the individuals who are incarcerated. They are taught lessons like not to "fraternize with the inmates" and that all incarcerated people are liars and manipulative. The attitude of superiority is passed on to the new officers, and they begin to view people who are incarcerated as not deserving of respect or dignity. So when they start working inside of the institution, they come with an attitude of disrespect. Some of the officers come to see that the lessons that were taught in the training academy do not match the reality of working inside the institution. Those officers are then targeted by the administration for the same psychological bombardment that is heaped upon those who are incarcerated. These

individuals usually find themselves resigning from their positions or conforming to the status quo.

At some of the institutions, you have policies surrounding visitation that requires the incarcerated individual to be assigned to a work detail (I will not call it a job, because none of the work that incarcerated individuals do is compensated) to receive a contact visit with their family. However, there are a limited amount of work details. So what you have is individuals being punished for no other reason than they do not have an available work detail. This creates a negative environment within the prison and it weakens the relationships that individuals have with their families and friends.

There are other policies that promote antisocial behavior. When there is a group of individuals trying to do something positive, the administration will write them a disciplinary for congregating. I remember one time I was disciplined and sent to isolation for 30 days and administrative segregation for over 6 months for raising money for the Islamic community's feast. I had gone to the unit chaplain and gotten permission to collect money for the Islamic community. The unit chaplain approved my request. I was the treasurer of the community. I would give fellow prisoners what are known as "inmate checks." They would fill the checks out and a deduction would be taken from their account. When the deduction is taken, I would then record their receipt in a ledger to keep track of the amount and who donated to the Islamic community. Once a week, I would go to

the chaplain to make sure his records reflected mine. This was a practice that the Islamic community used to be self-sufficient. However, one day when the unit was being searched for contraband, the assistant warden came across the ledger I was using. He looked through it and questioned me about what he saw. I explained it to him in detail and told him that the chaplain and bookkeeping would support my story and that none of the money was coming to me directly. He confiscated the ledger and accused me of running a gambling operation. I was immediately placed in isolation, written a disciplinary, and ultimately received 30 days in solitary confinement. Upon completion of the days, I was placed in administrative segregation for approximately 6 months.

Then you have the "inmate council," classes like Transactional Analysis, and The Jaycees (a nationwide organization that promotes leadership) being taken out of the prisons because they did not fit with the narrative that prison officials promote. Both programs and the class either gave incarcerated individuals the ability to raise funds for different programs that were geared to help the incarcerated population or gave them information to deal with problems in a healthier way. When these programs were being implemented in the units, you had men that were positively involved in their community. When the Transactional Analysis (T.A.) was being taught, you had guys dealing with their conflicts more rationally. However, because it was giving the incarcerated individuals the tools to deal with the officers from a more rational standpoint and

help them challenge a lot of their dysfunctional thinking, the administration deemed the material to be manipulative and banned it from being taught within the units. Part of the reason that the "inmate council" and the Jaycees program ended within units is that every time there was a significant amount of money in a person's account, the powers that be would use the funds for their personal projects.

When the people who are in authority are conducting themselves in such a dysfunctional way, this leads to dysfunctional behavior in the carceral population. However, if you asked the people who are in charge of the prison system why some of these policies are in place, you would probably get the same response that you would get from the new group of monkeys if asked, "Why do the beatings take place?" They would both probably say, "I don't know, that's just how things are done around here."

Chapter 5

Esteem Needs

*The need for recognition and
respect from others*

“The real tragedy is that
we’re all human beings,
and human beings have a sense
of dignity. Any domination by one
human over another leads to a loss
of some part of his dignity.
Is one’s dignity is that big it can be
crumbled away like that?”

— Yusuf Idris

Self-esteem is very important when we look at what makes a healthy, functional individual. I stated earlier that the need for a person to be able to govern themselves affects their self-worth. This is pretty much taken away from individuals when they are incarcerated and this is a big stain on their self-esteem. When we look closely at the oppressive conditions of the prison, even if we are looking vicariously through the eyes of others, it's not hard to see how a person's self-worth is damaged. Slavery is real and every day that a person is incarcerated, they are a slave of the state. We must think and recognize how this affects people. People think of themselves in terms of what they do most of the time. However, the ADC tries to convince incarcerated people that they should define themselves in terms of their crime. The ADC has developed a thousand nails used to hammer individuals into a coffin of self-hate. I stated before that a person who is incarcerated sacrifices themselves a thousand times daily. This happens when we submit to the thing we should stand against.

We are expected to submit our overall identity to the socialization that the administration has developed, and if we do not, we are punished. For 28 years and 11 months, I was assaulted and for the same amount of time, I waged war against the ADC. Some days were better than others. Some days, I felt as if I won and others, I felt like I lost badly. One of the first assaults on your self-worth is when the ADC tries to reduce you to a number. They tell you that this number is the primary way you will be recognized, and if you forget the number or don't use it upon

command, then you will be punished. Your informal name will never be used as an identifier, only your surname, followed by your ADC number. This is done to disassociate you from your identity. Our names are important and when we lose them, we effectively lose a part of ourselves. When you are reduced to a number and only allowed to use your surname subconsciously, you are being reduced to an automaton. If you are wearing a pair of shoes or clothing that is not state-issued, they will be confiscated and you will receive a disciplinary. You are not even given the ability to smell differently. If you have on cologne, you run the risk of your property being ramshackled and will receive a disciplinary. They sprinkle the destructive seeds of dehumanizing language into the subconscious mind.



Words like convict, inmate, and prisoner are constant reminders of the insufferable conditions. The person will start identifying themselves through the subjective lens of the administration. When we start viewing ourselves in terms of these pejorative references, we start reflecting on the energy and characteristics of these adjectives. These are all attempts to rob the individual of their identity and self-worth. The above are only a few of the many tricks that the ADC uses to seduce the individual out of their identity.

Many other tactics are used to try to convince the person that their overall way of thinking is flawed, and that is why they are incarcerated — that nothing is redeemable about you, as if, because you committed a crime, you have no redeemable traits. There are rules surrounding the opposite sex. If someone is incarcerated for an extended period of time, they become emotionally and socially handicapped. You are not allowed to hug people of the opposite sex if they come into the prison. There are policies in place that state you can not have any physical contact other than shaking hands. If a female guard is working within the unit, there are policies that will result in receiving a disciplinary if you look at her too long. However, she can be in the same room as you if you are being strip searched.

The ADC says that they want to rehabilitate the individuals who are incarcerated. However, for the most part, the ADC only wants to change them into what they want them to be. They actively attempt to assassinate the person's identity completely. On a daily basis, the

administration tries to make a concerted effort to convince the individual that they deserve to be in prison and that the treatment that they are undergoing is justified because they committed a crime. It does not matter how long or short your sentence is, if you are in prison, you deserve the treatment that you receive. This is the underlying current that props up the penal system in Arkansas.

This socialization has many comparisons to Gestapo, Apartheid, and Jim Crow tactics. I ask the reader not to think about how it might feel to be incarcerated but to think about concentration camps and slave plantations and how the people must have felt who were caught up in what most around the world would consider two of the most egregious crimes against humanity. What did each of these systems do to the human spirit, and what does mass incarceration and the tentacles that wrap around the individuals within the system do to their self-esteem?

I would like to share with you several personal stories about how barbaric treatment and invisible trauma affects people daily. Assaults come in microforms, like being talked to in a condescending manner and treated like a child, having your personal pictures of loved ones confiscated and destroyed because you have more than five, and policies saying that you can't have more than 25 people on your approved visitation list. These policies and more lend to the weakening of the family structure and in some cases make the incarcerated person feel unloved. They also

increase the likelihood of antisocial personality behaviors developing, which in turn affects communication skills.

I believe that your ability to have healthy social interactions with others has a direct correlation to how you feel about yourself. I can attest to this from many interactions that I had with staff members when incarcerated. The particular incident I want to explain happened in the commissary line. A female staff member walked out of the commissary. I do not know what perked my interest, but I spoke and began to have a conversation. I asked her about the weather and may have complimented her on her outfit. Our exchange lasted about two minutes. At the end of the conversation, I told her to have a nice day, which brought our conversation to an end. This may not seem to be unusual to the reader who has never been incarcerated but to those who have, or have ever worked in a prison setting, we know that the conversation that I had was unusual. So much so that at the end of our exchange, the other five guys who were waiting in line with me asked me, "You must know her?" I then responded, "No, that was just two people having a free world conversation." In many ways, both prisoners and officers become so desensitized to basic human interaction that when we see it in prison, it is viewed as abnormal. This not only damages the incarcerated individual, but it also damages the officers who work in a prison setting. We must remember that you can not have a slave without a slave master (or the oppressed without an oppressor). They both are equally entangled in

the destructive nature that it has on your self-worth.

Abnormality is normalized in a prison setting. This normalization is one of the bedrocks of self-devaluation and over the many years of living under abnormal social cues, people become indoctrinated into a prison mentality. For many years of my incarceration, I woke up every morning and asked myself, "Do you have the spirit of a free man, or do you have the spirit of a slave?" This question kept me grounded in my freedom. I always stayed conscious of my personhood and did not let others' subjective view of me define my objective reality of myself. I learned in the later part of my incarceration that freedom was not a physical condition, but was predicated on a mind set. I learned this from one of my mentors. His name was Brother Omar, and he had five life sentences without parole. He had been incarcerated for about 20 years when I first met him. One day, we were talking about freedom, and he told me that he was already free. I thought that his words were crazy. However, after some years had passed, I understood that he was not physically free, but he was free in his mind and the way he interacted with the world. He was the kind of person who always had a positive attitude and was respected by both officers and incarcerated individuals. He gave me sound principles that helped me stay conscious of my personhood. He once told me, "If you always govern yourself, no one can ever govern you." Brother Omar never let the abnormality of prison become normalized in his mentality.



Before we move into the next category, which is Self-Actualization (or our hopes and dreams), I would like to introduce the reader to an experiment that was done in the Sixties on dogs by a psychologist named Martin Seligman. He placed one set of dogs on an electric floor with no escape and another set of dogs on an electric floor with a way to escape. He administered shocks to both sets of dogs. The control group, those that had an escape route, moved to the side of the floor that was not electrified. The ones that did not have an escape route became conditioned to the shock and stopped trying to escape. Even when placed on the floor that had a way to escape, they did not leave their condition. This is called learned helplessness. The psychological definition of learned helplessness is a phenomenon observed in both humans and other animals when they have been conditioned to expect pain, suffering, or discomfort without a way to escape it. This is a very important tool

when looking at the conditions of prisons and recidivism. I have explained a lot of the attacks that people in prison face daily and how it affects self-esteem. Self-efficacy plays a big part in learned helplessness. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their capacity to act in the ways necessary to reach specific goals. People with a higher level of self-efficacy are less likely to succumb to learned helplessness. People with low self-efficacy are more likely to succumb to learned helplessness. However, when people's self-worth is attacked daily, self-esteem and self-efficacy are lowered.

Let me take a brief minute to discuss the survival brain. In normal circumstances, when people suffer traumatic events, the brain goes into what is called fight or flight mode, and the survival brain kicks in. However, the brain is not designed to stay in a continuous survival mode for long periods of time, but this is what prison does. Prisons make people operate out of the survival brain. The survival brain is trying to keep the individual alive, but it acts impulsively in order to maintain self-preservation. Trauma triggers this part of the brain and the conditions of prison are a trauma-inducing environment. So, what we are seeing in our prison systems are people being forced into the condition of learned helplessness, which in response, causes them to operate from their fight or flight brain for an extended period of time—sometimes years or even decades. This can cause side effects including lack of focus, changes in memory, fatigue, emotional reactivity, forgetting to care for basic needs, and being more impulsive. All these behaviors

can lead to recidivism. You can also see these characteristics in an overwhelming majority of the individuals who have experienced long-term incarceration.

When we view Seligman's experiment and the theory of survival brain in context with rehabilitation, recidivism, and the overall prison environment, we can see how the environment of prison only fosters destructive and counterproductive characteristics in those who are incarcerated. The question we as a society should be asking ourselves is whether the people we have given the responsibility to run our penal system are aware of the damage being done to the individuals who are incarcerated. If so, how can we hold them accountable for what we are seeing in the way of recidivism and crime within our communities? Have our penal systems become no more than an inhumane experiment? These are some of the questions that we should ask ourselves if we want to see individuals return to our communities healthy and whole. When we see brokenness in our returning citizens, we must ask ourselves what is the root cause of that brokenness.

Chapter 6
Self-Actualization

*The need to live up to one's fullest
and unique potential*

“You’ve made her sit on the edge
of the world, but took away
the solid surface of the earth
beneath, you’ve made her dream
with her eyes wide open, but failed
to fulfill her hopes.”

— Jvoti Patel

On September 10, 1990, I walked into a courtroom in Little Rock, Arkansas, and was sentenced to a life without parole sentence in the Arkansas Department of Corrections. I was 18 years old at the time and the things that I once had dreams of accomplishing died at the moment I was sentenced. The only thing that I could think about was what my prison experience would be and whether I would ever be free to walk outside of confinement. The sentence that I was given was an effective dream killer. At the moment that I was sentenced, I did not understand the totality of the sentence. I did not understand that the ADC would not promote my self-education nor help in providing me with rehabilitative programs. I didn't understand how the officers would try to push me into an acceptance of an institutionalized mentality. When I first arrived at the Tucker Unit, my parent unit, the first thing that the officer at the sally port asked me was "How much time do you have?" I responded, "Life wIthout." He then said, "Get comfortable." I later came to understand the intent behind this statement. Getting comfortable meant forgetting about the people and the life you had before coming to prison. The girlfriend and loved ones that I have, I should forget about them.

Any higher education that I might have desired, I should forget about. Every time I tried to get into the college courses or treatment programs that were offered at the units, I was refused acceptance because of the amount of time I had. If I tried to get placed on a work detail within the unit that gave me access to a computer, I

was denied because of the time I had. I was placed in the worst barracks and placed at the worst units because of the time I had. Before my 19th birthday, I was transferred to the Cummins Unit approximately three hundred miles from my nearest family because of the time I had. I was encouraged to immerse myself in prison life by officers. This is what the statement "Get comfortable!" came to represent.

Even though I rebelled against "getting comfortable," as the years slowly ticked by, so did my resolve to hold onto my dreams. The conditions of prison and the reality of my sentence made it hard to see a future outside of confinement. When you are serving a life without parole sentence or death by incarceration (a sentence that is more than 40 years), it has a way of chipping away at your dreams. To tell a person that they will die in prison and close off their access to the courts is not only inhumane, but it also goes against the principles of reform.

Self-Actualization is the category of needs that rest closest to the spirit of humanity. It calls for us to be greater than our situation. It is the part of us that is goal and vision orientated. We were encouraged as youth to use this God-given ability, when asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" As adults, we still use it when we ask ourselves and others, "Where do I see myself in five years?" However, prison numbs this innate need through the oppression of the spirit. People that are serving long-term sentences are affected to a greater extent than those who have short-term sentences.

The most prevalent dream that someone with a life without parole or death by incarceration sentence has is how to get free: ways of finding peace. The preoccupation with physical freedom keeps people from elevating to their highest potential. This not only stops them from gaining their freedom, but it also stops them from realizing their greatness. After having served over 10 years of incarceration, having been barred from the courts, and seeing no way out of prison, I gave up all hopes and dreams.

However, just as I was on the brink of shutting myself off from my self-actualization, my mentor Brother Omar encouraged me to attend a meditation class that Ms. Anna Cox facilitated. I was reluctant to attend the class, but the respect that I had developed for Brother Omar made me give it a chance. I remember not being able to trust Ms. Anna because she was too nice in an environment that did not promote niceness. After I attended approximately five meetings, I gave myself permission to trust the information that was being offered. And this is what opened my eyes to a part of myself that was in danger of being lost. One day, we were challenged in a group to recreate ourselves. We were asked to close our eyes and find the person that we wanted to be: to place him in the environment that we want to see him in, clothe him, and give him the attributes that we envision ourselves having. This exercise was a game-changer for me. After leaving the meditation group, I recaptured that part of myself. In my personal self-reflection, I used that image of myself as a guidepost to who and what I will become. I started incorporating positive affirmations into

my daily life and would sometimes tell people that I am in the process of "Being and Becoming!"

One of the most damaging things that our penal system does is kill people's hopes and dreams. No one should be subjected to such treatment. Everyone should have an opportunity to improve their condition. Those who are given the responsibility to govern the institutions should encourage and promote people's hopes and dreams.

After having served 28 years and 11 months of incarceration, I have been physically free for four years now. I can truly say that the person that I saw some 20 years ago in the meditation group, I have become. However, today I'm still in the process of "Being and Becoming!"