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Searching for the Beautiful Prison

For as long as I can recall, all my dreams are about prisons, are about the kind of prisons that occupy a place of nightmare for most. After more than three continuous decades living inside the confines of these nightmarish places, I cannot even dream my way back out. My unconscious mind is imprisoned no less than my tattooed skin.

Prison is a total experience, as the wholly accurate truism holds. No part of the incarcerated isn't inside, and no part of the free person is inside. The gulf between here and there is vast. The physical and social construct that is the modern institution has resulted in the creation of a separate world called prison, populated by inmates who have no individual identities — inmates who wear the same clothes, have the same haircuts, and have become blurred versions of every other inmate.

This means, in practice, that every one of us bears the collective guilt of every other one of us, and is subject to the collective wrath of all victims of crime. And every one of us must hold within him or herself all the shame and remorse of every other one of us, to the absurd degree that the poor, petty thief is designated too high a risk for early release in the media frenzy of the hyper-politicized world of prison politics.

It is this “total experience” model that must be deconstructed for anything remotely beautiful to occur in the prison system.

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There is a straight line that leads, inevitably, to the current state of affairs.

The modern prison is a profoundly effective isolation chamber, surrounded by armed gun towers, coils of concertina wire, and lethally charged electric fences. Prisoners, now perfectly isolated and depersonalized to *inmate* status, vanish into the haze of obscurity, defined only by guards, politicians, and crime victims. Because of our invisibility and anonymity, prisoners can be anything those most interested in applying a definition wish to describe. It's always that which is most unknown, most unnamable, that's most frightening.

The only possible way to foundationally alter the current system is to take apart the total nature of the experience and diminish the isolation from the rest of society. So, through the eyes of a lifetime prisoner, whose very dreams are imprisoned, the idea of a "beautiful" prison requires a tremendous leap of imagination and faith. Having borne the weight of decades of scorn, abuse, and hatred, of the vilest of characterizations and the meanest of mean spirits, finding beauty inside the shell of separation is a Herculean task. Hopefully, it's not also a Sisyphean one.

Still, in spite of the decades of maltreatment, remarkably, I've seen beauty in here, stumbled across it and been the beneficiary of its soothing balm. Perhaps, like the green shoots of spring's conquest of winter, the requirement is one of selective focus and a hopeful disposition.

I've stood next to a glamorous woman on a prison yard who, somehow, saw through the fortress buildings and beyond the rows and rows of fences to the beauty of the hills ringing the compound.

I've felt the awesome power and purity of the love of a little girl not at all diminished by its presence in a room designed to thwart human contact and discourage connection.

I've witnessed acts of kindness and compassion performed by those who would describe themselves as unkind and hard-hearted.

I've been the recipient of generosity completely unexpected and below the radar of recognition, multiplying its value and sincerity.

Every day in a prison, guards and prisoners alike are subjected to a set of expectations that define roles and constrict behavior. I must walk down the roadway inside the yellow line painted on the asphalt designated for me, and the guards must walk on the other side of the same line. Nevertheless, we suffer from the same disappointment when the Raiders lose, again, and we all rail against the unreasonable nature of fate and the incompetence of weather forecasters.

Back when I came to the joint, it was common to hear prisoners referred to by their first names without derision. But as the gears of the prison-industrial complex wound-up and we became objects of commodification, most all of that changed. It became necessary for the guards to depersonalize us, and their relations with us, probably for their own sanity as much as anything else.

I once lived in a cell with a waxed brick red floor and sand tan walls, with all of the metal parts chocolate brown. I had Maxfield Parrish prints framed in redwood behind glass. My clothes hung from the walls on polished, ornate brass hooks. The beds had matching spreads made by a prisoner with a months long waiting list. I wore Levi's 501 jeans, colored T-shirts, and a silver hoop earring. The building guards often came by my cell to compliment me on the latest improvement.

Today, I live in a cell with a bare, scarred concrete floor. The walls are poorly painted off-white with peeling industrial blue on the metal, exactly the same as every other cell. The walls are bare of trimming, not because I stopped loving the lurid colors and intricate details of

Art Nouveau, but because I'm not allowed any form of decoration in my cell. The beds are made with dull gray woolen blankets that get rolled up every day to hide their ghastly ugliness. I wear blue pants with a cheap elastic waistband and large, yellow letters spelling out "PRISONER" down the right leg. The guards now comment on how "in compliance" is my cell.

There are no flower beds on the yards, no splashes of color of any kind — no murals, no eccentrically dressed prisoners wearing purple hats or multi-colored yard shorts. Instead there's an indistinct mass of gray and white, on top of blue pants stamped with shame down one leg.

This is not, in any way, a beautiful reality.

Nevertheless, this is an exercise in imagining a beautiful prison.

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There are dogs barking and trees whose heavy limbs have rope swings attached to them. The perimeter is obscured by vegetation, and the front gate is crowded with flowers. There is a security force, but it stays out of sight unless it's needed. The "beat" guards look like the cops in any big city, and they are trained to see themselves as a part of this community.

The prisoners live in buildings that look like apartment blocks. Every morning we go to work to jobs that produce something useful to the rest of the world. There's a bank and a market, and on the weekends a movie theater opens. In our living quarters there's a bathroom and a kitchenette, and a semblance of privacy along with the freedom to personalize our walls. Counts are done respectfully. Escapes are infrequent because the expectation is one of eventual release.

At night, the schools and therapy rooms open up, and we go because human beings treated with dignity conduct themselves with self-respect. A positive sense of self-worth is

fostered, which results in myriad efforts to balance out the scales with the rest of society. Prisoners devote themselves to community service projects, to volunteerism, to genuine restorative justice.

And every prisoner is eligible for parole as soon as he or she is ready to rejoin society as a productive, contributing member. Disinterested professionals trained in the humane arts and sciences determine this readiness. Politics is barred from the process by all necessary means.

The fundamental idea is to turn the “total experience” of prison into a total immersion in healing and socialization. The barren fortress is now a small city where men and women are encouraged to regain their essential humanity, to learn how to function not as automatons judged by artificial measures of compliance to ludicrous and pointless rules, but as free citizens. The purpose is not to discipline and punish but to educate and restore.

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In one of the countries of northwestern Europe, some years back, the government decided to open a new maximum-security prison to replace the aging old one, a new prison for its most dangerous offenders. The “cells” would be like studio apartments, with private baths and restrooms. The prison would be built around a state-of-the-art furniture factory. But the most revolutionary aspects of this institution involved the staff. Two basic requirements were set for the guards at this prison. First, all must be journeymen carpenters, with a high enough skill level and the motivation to train the prisoners. Second, none could have been prison guards before. Ever.

In this second prerequisite, a fundamental acknowledgment of what is wrong with prison was revealed. The monumentally asymmetrical power relationship between prisoners and guards damages both sides of the dyad. Because of the politics of public employee unions and crime

victims, guards are usually accorded a presumption of professionalism even though the truth on the ground often disproves this. This, too, is a direct result of the total nature of the experience inside a prison. The guards are traumatized at least as much as the prisoners. However, with the connivance of the media and the tacit assent of the terrified citizenry, the guards are given *carte blanche* to keep the predators inside the perimeter, whatever it takes. In essence, the whole of society becomes the unnamed, mostly unwitting, co-conspirator in the creation of edifices dedicated to the suffering of fellow human beings.

Repulsive prisons are everywhere, blotting out whole sections of the rural landscape of contemporary America, or, inside the cities, compressed into vertical slabs of blank walls fenestrated only with mirrors. These eyesores reek of the industrialization of incarceration, of the huge business of prison. Like most establishments dedicated to the service of the mass markets, there is a disposable quality, a form that follows the function of processing and rendering. The stink of the abattoir hides behind impassive, silent walls and inside cloned boxes squatting inside miles of chain-link fence.

The old prison-castles of the 19th and early 20th centuries, embellished with turrets and the defined spaces of merlons marching across the rooftops, held a kind of grotesque attraction in their heavy solidity and symbolism. When the bus rolled up to the gatehouse, when the iron-barred portcullis was opened and the diesel-powered ship of the damned motored into the portecochere, at least you knew where you were, what you were there for, and what you could expect. The guards were guards and the cons cons, and this was the joint, the penitentiary, the big house. And just as the stony gargoyles spouting rainwater off the stones of cathedrals projected a frightening beauty, the machicolations of old Folsom's ornate towers, or the crushing weight of Sing Sing's wall, were beautiful in their own terrifying ways.

The new tilt-up half-pentacle boxes with their organs exposed, their walls punctured by dull, square access points partially obscured in dingy, scratched plastic, feed no imagination, spark no thoughts, elicit neither dragons nor griffins. They merely fill up space and use up truckloads of cheap cement. There is nothing remotely beautiful about them, only a bland nothingness.

The old places, even with all their horror and history of repression, managed to fascinate people. At the gift store after the tour, no one will ever wear a T-shirt with the flat profile of any of these new prisons. Perhaps this is the most horrifying aspect of the modern prison, the modern prison system, its ability to flatten out prisoners. There will never be a Birdman of the California Correctional Institution, Unit IV-A, or any similar character of renown out of any one of the dozens of cookie-cutter facilities that plague the landscape of rural Texas like pustules in the rolling hills.

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Maybe all of this musing on the relative degrees of beauty in the architecture of old and new prisons is simply a way to draw out a labored metaphorical point that, finally, trumps the physical.

The beautiful prison is not really a design or a place; it is a function. A world-famous production of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" could take place inside the 150-year old walls of San Quentin because the administrators and the local community of artists worked with the prisoners to bring the beauty of language and performance into that dismal pile of broken rocks.

Even inside the graceless, buzzing electric fences of the California State Prison, Los Angeles County, the pluperfect example of the modern, flatworm institution, plunked down onto

a square mile of dusty high desert wasteland, filled to overflowing with mind-numbing buildings decorated only with spray painted numbers, colored neutral tan—even in this expanse of void, a prisoner-led revolution like the Honor Program could occur.

The beautiful prison won't be an elaborately constructed theme park ride that manages to hide the gears and keep the trash cans clean. And transformational events can happen as readily in a dump as in a palace: probably more likely in the former by the measure of my experience. The object must always be the reclamation of troubled souls, the mending of wounded hearts, and the making of amends.

Without hesitation, the most beautiful prison is the one not built. Barring that, extant buildings put to some use more numinous in nature — homeless shelters, arts studios, anything that adds to the healing of the world is a definite step up and away from the negation and trauma of the odious and repugnant prison.

The beautiful prison is characterized by the quality of its treatment of human beings. Respect is real and not based on fear but on the recognition of the inherent dignity of even the most damaged. The goal of placement is rebuilding and reintegration, not to torment and brutalize. Punishment is never for the sake of inflicting pain and suffering. In the beautiful prison, men and women who have done awful and even vile things are constantly encouraged to rise above their worst acts and rejoin society. This is done because to do any less is to succumb to the basest of human instincts, to fall prey to the worst of what resides in all of us, to become ugly.

Restoration, rehabilitation, reconciliation, redemption, resolution — these are the watchwords of the beautiful prison.