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Marion Prison

Hell In a Very Small Space

By DANIEL BERRIGAN, S.J.

Writing about prisoners is a little like writing about the dead: the mass dead, the unknown and unknowable, those killed in disasters like Managua or Nagasaki or Lebanon. No one cares, no one knows; who the dead were, what difference they made dead or alive, why they perished, what our debt is to them. Prisoners are the 'undead' of today's horror films (low budget) and the gothic novels of the 19th century. They inspire horror and dread and revulsion. A different planet, different beings, hardly human. Who wants to know hardly humans?

For just such reasons—that no one wants to know, that most people fear to know, that no one listens or ponders—for such reasons, it is entirely crucial to keep writing, keep talking about prisoners. What no one wants to know may be exactly what everyone needs to know. What everyone is afraid to know may be what will snatch us from damnation. I call it the Cod Liver Oil principle, out of my boyhood; the least savory taste in the world saves lives, saves reason. Or, I think of a sensible application of the old 'analogy of faith' principle we learned in theology. A truth in one realm sheds needed light on all truth. Everything real touches everything real.

Another reason why people shy away from knowing about prisoners: what a drag, they sigh. The facts are such a burden, piling up, lying unassimilated and inert there in the mind. What are we to do with the daily need of horrors? We can carry it about like a sack full of snakes. But where shall we lay it down, or exchange it for something lightsome, a cash product, a prestige item? Let's just take our Jesus weightless, please.

This trembling, awe, fixation, fear. It gathers around the fate of the great mass of prisoners in America, it disrupts our stereotypes about ourselves, free, brave, white, benign, just... Then the prisoners loom up, the largest concentration of prisoners in western history, some quarter of a million of them—largely non-white, male, poor. Ourselves? Ourselves and not our-

selves, we and the havoc we wreak. We, and the needful victims of—we.

A like fear and trembling arises at the spectacle of political prisoners. To the outside worlds, prison is somewhat like a cancer ward. Those who walk in will never walk out; so the myth goes. Prisoners are portents, sources of awe (revealers of our



Dan Berrigan speaking at St. Louis University forum on Human Rights in a Nuclear World. Forum was co-sponsored by National Committee to Support the Marion Brothers and the Social Justice Commission of the Missouri Province of the Jesuits

condition?). We resist the truth they have to offer. This is why, even among peace people too, there is such fudging on the question of serious civil disobedience. At meetings evaluating the June actions at the U.N., discussion on the conduct, ethos, of those taking part, was minimal. What counted was, in a curiously sanitized obscurity, media 'exposure.' The leadership, at least the visible part of it, seemed to dread above all, the essential invisibility of prison, the wipe-out. Arrest, well maybe. But disappearance, even for a few days? Hell no, we won't go.

Sheer hopelessness. Resignation. You read it in the faces. Before the fact, before the attempt to do something, all of modern life, at its boiling, tossing center, seems hopeless. Acceded, admitted to, the bent heads, cop-out, retreat, jogging, health spas, kids' games for adults, homemaking, money making... Resistance is hopeless, a waste. 'They' are too big, omnivorous, powerful. Our side has no one, no money, no energy, etcetera, etcetera. The etceteras would fill a Kelly girl's (sic) waste basket with a macho stuffer.

We don't want to be helpless. We don't want to be inarticulate. We don't want to be off the street. We don't want to sit alone in a box, be shunted around in cuffs. We don't want to be losers. We don't want to die, even a little. We want, maybe, to talk about the poor, or prisoners, or refugees, or the ghettoized—to write about them, or commiserate, or (on occasion) leaflet at a prison, or protest the death penalty. To go far enough in, as the song has it, to be able to say we were there... It is a little like the terrified fear of the seriously ill, "I've tried everything." And often you find they've tried everything but the one essential thing. Christians have tried everything but Christianity.

The Undead Come Alive

What does one do with knowledge of the facts, the atrocious, unbearable treatment of people, prisoners? The kind of knowledge that might heighten empathy, send blood racing in compassion? and yet does something quite different—leaves one with folded hands?

You unfold your hands.

And then there is the question of prayer, which consists for the most part in insisting that God do for us what we are unwilling to do for one another. Resolve: Let's do for one another what we would have God do for all. This is known as godlike activity.

In such ways, the undead (ourselves) come alive.

Prisons have a radically different relationship than other public structures, to a given culture. In a morally underdeveloped land such as ours, one still hears talk of the reform of universities or the renewal of political forms, or even the rebirth of the churches. These are not inherently lost causes, though the times conspire to make them so. But the reform of prisons! One would have to be fond as Macawber or mad as Lear to propose such an oxymoron, in America, in '78. An inherently lost cause, which mad times invest with an altogether spurious, mad-eyed legitimacy. It is a legitimacy lent by fear to the absurd; fortunes are built on it, bad jobs multiply like maggots, *bureaucrats*, academics, chaplains clone like crazy. Everyone wants a cut, everyone has something to offer—the cosmetic job on a dead horse.

For at least some prisoners, the situation has a kind of wry piquancy. They are ornaments of a system which manages at one and the same time to be anti-biblical, anti-historical, anti-human, morally outrageous, socially unworkable, ruinously expensive, and metaphysically repugnant. A cancer spot on the universal karma. Is there a consolation in being pitched into a madhouse? Out of the worst may come the best. Meantime like the hero of "King of Hearts," the prisoners dance, mime, grimace, mimic the insanity of society-at-large.

The most neglected texts of the New Testament in our lifetime, refer directly to the greatest crimes of our lifetime: war, capital punishment, abortion. These are flagrant assaults on the God of Life, the command which is a self-revelation of God, "Thou shalt not kill." The implications of violating the command, in our shucking off our godlike aura, are appalling. The second most neglected texts of the New Testament today, refer to the second greatest of crimes: those committed against people whose fate, for one reason or another, falls short of actual murder. In general, the condemning of vast numbers to servitude, victimhood, exploitation. And among those so reduced, maimed, made sport of, reduced to zeros, we must surely count the prisoners. Their fate cries out to heaven for vengeance. It is a consequence of the hardening of heart, brutalizing of conscience, which the Bible speaks of as a common affliction of the last times.

Now there remain these three — faith, hope, and professionalism — but the greatest of these is professionalism.

I could count on the fingers of my left hand the number of Jesuits I know who give a hang about prisoners. We are professionalized out of our skulls. Young people who enter the Order without a clue to the real world, are tracked into academe as surely as, say, ghetto kids are tracked into Africa. Thus on our side, does classism replace Christianity.

Collusion

I spoke at a State campus in Illinois on the horrors being even then perpetrated at the Marion Federal Prison in that state. I was immediately taken on by a huffing bureaucrat of the university. (I had suggested that the evidence showed a strongly-forged collusion between the academics and prison officials, in the creation of ever more sophisticated punishment centers.) He declared with some heat, and in the teeth of the evidence, that such things were unthinkable at Urbana. I was reminded of an old horse we had for years on the farm, blind in the left eye. We used to conceal tricks, stratagems, surprise assaults on the poor animal, all in silence, all on the blind side. He never knew, until it was too late. Which is to say, he never knew.

But in the matter of the Marion Illinois Behavior Modification Center. Prisoners who remain unbroken by the bonebreakers, sometimes perform marvels of making do. One of the marvels is the research and writing done, somehow, by a group of inmates, subject to duress and snooping at the Marion Center. What follows draws heavily on their work.

In 1962, a watershed meeting was held in Washington, between prison officials and social scientists. A Dr. Edgar Schein of MIT there presented certain ideas on the subject, "Man Against Man(sic): Brain washing." The ideas were seized on by penologists and practitioners with considerable fervor, and laid, in fact, the ideological and practical basis for the Marion Center. Said Schein:

In order to produce marked changes of attitude and/or behavior, it is necessary to weaken, undermine, or remove the supports of the old attitudes. Because most of these supports are the face-to-face confirmation of present behavior and attitudes, which are provided by those with whom close emotional ties exist, it is often necessary to break those emotional ties. This can be done either by removing the individual physically and preventing any communication with those whom he cares about, or by proving to him that those whom he respects are not worthy of it, and, indeed, should be actively mistrusted.

Schein had arrived for the meeting prepared to offer more than theory. He fairly bristled with practicalities, of which I quote only a few:

—Physical removal of prisoners to areas sufficiently isolated to effectively break or seriously weaken close emotional ties.

—Segregation of all natural leaders.

—Spying on prisoners, reporting back private material.

—Exploitation of opportunists and informers.

—Convincing prisoners they can trust no one.

—Systematic withholding of mail.

—Building a group conviction among prisoners that they have been abandoned by or are totally isolated from their social order.

—Using techniques of character invalidation; i.e., humiliation, revilement, shouting, to induce feelings of fear, guilt, and suggestibility; coupled with sleeplessness, an exacting prison regimen and periodic interrogational interviews.

And so on and so on. But the above will convey something of the flavor.

Are we to conclude that Dr. Schein is without human feeling? Perhaps rather, that he is in stern control. His psyche is untrammelled, he is ready for the job to be done. And he urges a like discipline on his hearers:

"I would like to have you think of brain washing, not in terms of politics, ethics, and morals, but in terms of the deliberate changing of human behavior and attitudes by a group of men who have relatively complete control over the environment in which the captive populace lives.

It would be a fatally simple error to consign Dr. Schein and his likes to the closed cabinet of Dr. Cagliari. He is no moral mutation. Indeed the treason of the intellectual is a crime at least as old as the groves of academe, whose values have sheltered, over the centuries, every type from the impassioned socratic to the nit-picking aberrant sophist, making the worst argument appear the better.

What is new in the situation is the wide largesse of the federal cornucopia, the out-pouring of whose goodies on campus research (especially in the social and pure sciences) the Vietnam decade illustrated. The truism was revealed: to cynic and innocent alike—no campus, however private or prestigious, can exist without government benefits. And, on the other hand, no war could be waged, no public opinion be turned around, no prison technique be introduced or tested, without the collaboration of the academics. From "value free," the campuses had turned necrophilic, parasitic.

This is the strangled and purring back ground music that played to Schein and his well-bred savageries. And for counterpoint, a fervent and grateful response. That a gentleman's agreement was being reached, that great things would follow, no one could be allowed to doubt. The Director of Federal Prisons offered an even-handed invitation to those present to get the work underway:

... we have a tremendous opportunity here to carry on some of the experimenting to which the various panelists have alluded. We can manipulate our environment and culture. We can perhaps undertake some of the techniques Dr. Schein discussed. ... Do things on your own. Undertake a little experiment with what you can do with the Muslims. Do it as individuals. Do it in groups, and let us know the results.

Thus the principle was blessed: camouflage-getters with the smarts, do what has to be done. They are like the Iscariot with briefcase of credentials; they like the betrayal clean and direct, they would coin from a dead man's eyes. And others who claim some connection with a humane tradition, who like to call on the shades of Socrates or Luther or Aquinas — they don't know what goes on in the labs or board rooms, or don't want to know. It comes to the same thing. There is a corrupting innocence as there is a blustering upfront corruption.

In such wise, by silence and collusion as well as Judas' bargaining, the fate of the

sweating prisoners at Marion is settled and sealed. In, among other places, the academic cloths and clusters of Urbana campus. There, as elsewhere, it is as rare to encounter a right minded, passionate, faculty member, as it is to meet his/her counterpart among say, the Jesuits. We are, in one of the baser coinages, 'privatized.'

When I was in Danbury prison, I had occasion to ask a prison doctor a question. (He had been a student in a college theology course I taught at Le Moyne. A good man, but weak, in a bad spot.) How long, in his opinion, could a prisoner bear with solitary confinement, without psychic harm? He put the outer limit at one week. "After that, one can expect disorientation, growing intense as the isolation goes on." Yet in Danbury, a relatively benign box, stretches in solitary often went for 30 days or more.

The Marion Pen, however, is not fooling around. There is a concentrated effort to push matters to the limit; the limit of endurance, the limit of the law, the limit of ethics. And over. It is not merely that the proposals of Schein and his crew of man-eaters have been put into practice, built in, quite coldly and literally. One can expect, after all, that a free hand will be offered when the silk suited, brief-cased scalpers descend on the defenseless. A wink, a covert nod, a bargain struck. Who has not seen it? Who, after all, need know, if this or that rule is bent, this or that new idea tried out? And if something leaks, who cares? And who says (this is the clincher) who says the caring must begin with those who are assaulted, bewildered, thrown off balance by a brand of new and fractious prisoners, politically reborn, hip, beyond impressing with a slick or winning over with carrots?

And Marion, be it noted, is not simply a prison where the ante is up, or the prison heat turned higher. Marion cannot really be compared on a yardstick of high security, legitimate violence, with conditions at Atlanta or Lewisburg. What all these pens have in common is, in other words, far less significant than what Marion alone practices and pushes.

In common, arguably, in the high voltage federal system are the following: murders, brutalization, drug pushing, destruction of mail, intimidation and harassment of visitors and families, racism designed to fragment the prisoners, abuse of religious belief and practice, misuse of therapy techniques, morose labor assignments, slave wages and practice of solitary confinement.

Then we come to Marion. Literally and symbolically to the end of the line, the Behavior Modification system. This is the darling of the federal workhouses, the 'iron maiden' of that chorus of furies whose chant is all of a new creation. There, straight jacketed, alternately cherished,

cosseted and cursed, permanently kept off balance, marinated in numerous sweet and sour juices, persuaded that conformity is all, drugged if need be, therapied out of his skull, victimized by every free floating ploy of the psycho trade: there dwells the prisoner who has made it, who is in process of making it, who horrors! may for a time resist making it.

We must linger over this obscure figure, his existence, his secret thought, his dark vision of life. These are of moment to all. And one need not cheaply or carelessly draw lines linking his fate and ours. The linkage is there, for those with eyes to see; indeed it has been boldly and explicitly drawn by prison authorities: "The purpose of the Marion control unit is to control revolutionary attitudes in the prison system and in the society at large." (Ralph Aron, former warden of Marion. Emphasis mine.)

Rage in Secret

Unique! Still, we are told that, at Marion even, a few prisoners hold out. They are jealous of their souls. They guard their thoughts, nursing their rage in secret. And let us not stop there; that dark rage is not what makes them dangerous; indeed, it is arguable that hatred is a serviceable tool of captivity. No, these holdouts cherish their anger, separate it with a jeweler's precision from the detritus of racism and frenzy. Justice is their passion. They are pure anger, cleanly fueled; like a blow torch laced with oxygen, they burn straight up. They are in service. And this makes them dangerous as a laser in skilled hands. They cut through adamant, they cut through time and the walls of hell itself. They cut through lies and rhetoric and false promises and threats and black looks and descending goons' clubs. They cut through the opaque culture, the omni-resistant curtain that hems them in — a spiritual slavery.

At this point the battle is joined.

One must be careful in the name of the heroic resisters of Marion, not to mystify the issue. Humans created Marion, humans must render it less lethal, or better still, must dismantle it. A mitigation of its horrors, of injustice and the degradation of souls, must be sought by legal and illegal means. Humans oppose humans, in a contest to the death; seizing on public apathy, certain minds are determined to make of the defenseless the victims, and of victims (if required) corpses. This must be resisted, the guilty brought to the bar.

On the other hand, it seems to me extraordinarily significant that the prisoners have grasped something deeper: the spiritual conflict that underlies their plight. Humans indeed created Marion but Marion is out of control, a technique gone berserk. To insist on this, to document it, the pris-

oners have done their homework on prison religion as well as prison economics, prison miseducation, prison discipline. More: they have had to create forms of faith that would help them to nurture the roots of resistance, speak for the soul, function in strikingly traditional ways; fasting, non-violent reprisal, care for one another, discipline, meditation. They have thus created whole cloth, a community deserving of the name prison religion has sold out; resisting, faithful improvising, tactically naive, witty.

And they have done all this, it must be remembered, in circumstances designed to daunt all but the hardiest spirits.

We are to imagine a cell, six feet by nine, in which one is locked for an unspecified number of days, weeks, months, for twenty three and one half hours each day, on unspecified charges.

There you sit. And there you stand, and there you pace. And there you bend over and in Daudet's wonderful phrase, 'teach the ants their ABC's.' In principle (as apart from practice) no one can lay a hand on you: no drugs, no screaming, wheaming, therapy sessions, no chaplains' soft soap, no yard, no sky. A double door, a sheet of steel, a sound proofed existence, also people-proofed, time proofed, motion proofed.

Worth pausing over; considerable genius has been expended here. Your body will bear no marks of brutality, sadism, technique. Physical torture, its principle and instruments and skills, is for export; your internal colon is unmarked. Apart from calling attention to what must remain a discreet enterprise, such stigmata would make the prisoner a less pure subject of soul bending. For the Marion Center is, after all, a laboratory. It may also be a confessional, a gulag, a Devil's Island up to date. But it is first and foremost a laboratory of social and soul change; it must approach the decontaminated purity of Skinner's famous Cambridge cellar.

Congratulations. You are now a candidate, honored in principle, dishonored in practice (a truly Pauline irony)—a candidate for the twice born human. Within such a vocation, it is understandable that the choices are not large. You may hasten the process, or abort it by suicide, as many do. A regrettable outcome, cheating on the state, whose outreach cannot prevent this final evasion. Or you may sabotage the process by an altogether wilful stubbornness. Some have even memorized portions of the Bible or the Bill of Rights as a bright bulwark; they incant the words night and day as though some secret virtue exuded from them, to make one untouchable by calipers and saw.

And finally, and in large part, others submit; and thus rejoin America, restored in limb, chastened in soul.