

(excerpted from *Eye of the Hurricane* by Dr. Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, with Ken Klonsky)

Chapter 5

Prison

A little child spoke to her father,
"Tell me sir", asked she,
"What is the meaning of freedom
And what is liberty?"
"One in the same, my child
Only two ways to say one word,
But for a better answer
Go out and catch yourself a bird."
The child did as she was instructed;
Successfully and full of pride
She brought a sparrow into the house
And sadly watched it die.
The child then turned to her father
With teardrops on her face,
"Why did my sparrow die, Sir,
Didn't he like this place?"
"That's not the point,"
Said the father to his child,
"And I say to you in these few words,
No one knows what freedom is
But the lack of it killed that bird."

I wrote this poem one night after a visit from my wife and daughter, Theodora, who might have been seven years old at the time. Each month when she came to visit with me at the prison, she would ask, "Daddy, why can't you come home with us?" I would try to explain to her as best I could what I was doing inside those walls, but could never find the right words. This poem came to me instead. It is the only poem I have ever written, as I'm sure is obvious to anyone who reads it. I realize that the poem neither answered her question nor applied any salve to her wound, but it did make me understand the degree of my own suffering and the suffering of other wrongly convicted people inside the walls of a prison from the arbitrary loss of freedom.

Dostoevsky once said that to measure the degree of civilization in any society, just enter into its prisons. By this standard, the United States and Canada join a long list of uncivilized societies. You cannot find too many good prisons throughout the world because the model for prisons has become more and more reactive, demonstrating the outrage that self-righteous citizens feel about the criminal behavior of others. Crime, it is thought, must be followed by severe punishment, the worse the punishment, the better, or kill 'em altogether. Part of the punishment of a prison is geographical isolation; federal, state and provincial prisons are often located in out-of-the-way places, making it almost impossible for poor families to visit with any frequency.

Although there were times when rehabilitation of human lives was the stated ideal of politicians and prison designers, what prison actually does is to destroy families, destroy human dignity, mental health, and self-respect. Can a person who hates himself ever be rehabilitated? Can a person exposed to hostility, viciousness, and the calculated disregard for human decency, become anything but hostile, vicious, and indecent? His life in prison is worth two cartons of cigarettes—if he happens to be good looking, somewhat less if he's not. And if he is not strong enough to defend himself, and few people are, he may be raped and pillaged. Let any part of that prison touch him and it will spread its ugliness like poison ivy; let any part inside of him, and he will have consumed a poison with no antidote. Penal institutions are themselves the cause of recidivism because their subliminal message to the prisoner is that he has forever crossed the line from civilization into barbarism. The only worthwhile lesson a prison teaches anyone is how to survive inside a prison.

As an innocent but reviled man in prison—a black man convicted of the racist killing of three white people and just narrowly escaping the electric chair—you could have bet your family inheritance that I would never again be free to see the sunrise. Because of my attitude, because of my absolute, unwavering conviction that I was innocent and my supposed lack of contrition, my chances of even living long enough to get my case back into court were very poor at best. But I could not give in to the threat of violence or isolation. Being found guilty by a jury of twelve misinformed people, a jury fed on lies, perjury and manufactured evidence, did not make me guilty. So I refused to act the part of a guilty man and become a good prisoner. Resistance was my defense. I would not speak to the guards nor would I acknowledge their existences. I refused to move to the rhythm of the prison or obey its arbitrary rules. I refused to wear its stripes. I refused to eat its food. I refused to work its jobs. I would have refused to breathe the prison air if I could have done so and yet remained alive. What I possessed that could never be compromised was my innocence. I wasn't even aware at that time that I had a Spirit, but that inner voice, that resistance, shows me, as I write this today, that my Spirit was very much alive and kicking.

My belief in my innocence and my stubbornness earned me many trips to solitary confinement, the black hole of silence. Trenton State Prison was built in 1849—it was a dungeon—and solitary there was six feet under the ground. I spent close to ten of my twenty years in darkness with no sanitary conditions, no toothbrush, no running water, five slices of stale bread, and a cup of warm water to drink. I ate the bread because I was determined to survive. Morning, noon, or night did not exist for me, just different shades of darkness. There was a smell down there, down under the ground, of body rot and filthy

waste buckets not emptied for three or four days. It really was a hole. Every fifteen days we were allowed to take a shower, and every thirty days we were given a medical examination.

Since they viewed me as a triple-racist-murderer, they were going to try to break my resistance by taking me down to the lowest level they possibly could. They would rather have broken my Spirit than killed me, but if I died in the process nobody would have cared, and they would have found an easy explanation for my death. Just as television representations present a false picture of the courts, the public is also shielded from the reality of its prisons. Prison is raw, naked violence, hatred and bitterness. Every day in that prison, my life was threatened. I was trapped at the bottom level of human society, the lowest point at which a person can exist without being dead: solitary confinement mimicked a coffin. Aside from my innocence, I had nothing else to hold on to but my life.

When Nelson Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island, he said that solitary confinement was the hardest part of his experience. He looked forward to the cockroaches walking across his cell floor and climbing the walls so that he would have someone or something to talk to. We used to say that solitary confinement at Trenton State Prison was so bad that even the cockroaches kept their distance. These subhuman conditions take a terrible toll on those who are actually guilty of crimes, but for those who are there in place of the guilty person, for those who have been wrongly convicted, every waking moment is pure torture and agony. "Why me?" the prisoner keeps asking himself, over and over. Like a cancer patient.

Prison is a society within society that is under the most orders of laws on this Earth. There are universal laws that the Earth is under, and laws of civilization that begin with constitutions and charters that devolve all the way down to mechanical laws: survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle. Prison is the easiest place to hurt others and to be hurt; prisoners are always engaged in life and death struggles behind those walls. Any kind of altercation or show of disrespect can be fatal, particularly in the morning. Someone may have gotten a letter from his wife's lawyer suing him for divorce, from his girlfriend saying she's found another man, or from his lawyer informing him that his latest appeal has been denied. When those cell doors open, the place becomes a pit of poisonous vipers. Prisoners may have been mouthing off to each other during the night. Now they have to pay the piper.

Oh, I was angry, too—angry for a very long time. I was eating hatred and victimization as though they were succulent morsels of buttered steak. I was angry at everything that moved. I was angry at the two state witnesses who lied. I was angry at the police who put them up to it. I was angry at the judge for allowing their testimony. I was angry at the prosecutor who sanctioned it. I was angry at the jury who accepted it. I was angry at my own lawyer for not being able to defeat it. I was angry at my family because they wanted me to quit, to give up, to be ordinary like the other prisoners so they could come and visit me once a month for ninety minutes. They wanted me to give up my protestation of innocence, the dream of freedom that meant everything to me. They wanted me to die virtually and wait to be buried.

Being sentenced to three lifetimes in prison was, as far as the duration of my life was concerned, forever. I had no way out. Even if the system became compassionate in

the future, they could only parole me to the next life sentence after twenty-five years. I was twenty-nine when I went in; after fifty years they could have only paroled me to my third life term at seventy-nine, when I would then have to serve another twenty-five years before becoming eligible for actual parole.

On my way from solitary confinement to one of those physical checkups in what they called the prison hospital, I happened to pass a mirror hanging on the wall and stopped dead. The grotesque image that glared out at me from that glass shocked me. I saw the face of hatred in that mirror. I saw a monster. That couldn't have been me! Bulging out of its head were big, glassy eyes. The skin was stretched so tightly over its face that it was shining. Its lips were thin and drawn back revealing big yellow teeth, rotted gums and a perpetual grimace of pure sadistic delight. Hatred and bitterness had taken me over. I wanted revenge. In the words of Bob Dylan, "If my thought-dreams could be seen, they'd put my head in a guillotine." Such a terrible deed had been done to me, a deed for which I took no responsibility, that I imagined killing millions of people. I was then capable of even that.

Solitary confinement wasn't exactly the end of the line, but I could certainly see the end of the line from where I was. Yet somehow I was able to maintain the irrational expectation that I would soon be released. With that expectation came the dream of my being able to resume my boxing career and even receive a hero's welcome back into the ring. Then something unspeakable happened. Boxing, the prison doctor told me, had left me with the beginnings of a detached retina. An operation was necessary. He was a doctor. Who was I to argue with him? But because I was considered a triple-racist-murderer, the authorities, no matter how much I protested, would not let me leave the

prison to go to a proper hospital. Compared to the treatments now available, retinal surgery forty-three years ago was in its infancy. The prison hospital had neither the expertise nor the equipment nor the sanitary conditions to perform such surgery, but so great was my determination and desperation to get back into the ring, that I put my natural instincts aside. The surgery was botched. When the bandages were removed I was blind in my right eye with no hope of recovery. Like Samson, I wanted to flail out and bring the whole prison structure down upon everyone.

In prison, you have no immediate outlet for your anger beyond hating your jailers and fellow prisoners. That hate, as I learned, only consumes the vessel that contains it. It doesn't really hurt another soul. There are prisons within prisons just as there are worlds within worlds. There was solitary confinement and then there was my own private prison—the conglomerate of personalities that made up what people used to call Rubin “Hurricane” Carter. These personalities existed separate from each other, ignorant of each other, and reacted to external stimuli just like machines. If I was going to survive that prison, I had to change. I had to rise above the level of this prison. I had to become something different, someone whose behavior was not at the mercy of external forces. The prison itself sure wasn't going to change.

The first step in that process of change was to rule out open defiance and to resist expressing any negative emotions. Resisting the expression of one's negative emotions even on a good day outside a prison is difficult. What I did to survive the prison was to find a space, not an actual physical space, but a moral and ethical one where I would not compromise myself and yet stay alive. I eased around things. I already said that I ate the bread in solitary. The white pajamas I had worn in the prison hospital became my prison

uniform at Trenton State just as I later wore a barber's smock at Rahway. I would never confront the guards, just ignore them. While I would not go to the mess hall to eat the food destined for the general population, I willingly ate the food made for the guards that the kitchen workers were sometimes able to sneak down to me. Thom Kidrin, my great friend on the outside, would bring me cans of Campbell's soup that I ate once every three days. I broke rules, but many of the rules I broke, for example the wearing of beards, moustaches, watches, rings, and one's own personal clothing, I was eventually able to have legalized so that the other prisoners also benefited.

I refused to shave my beard. The authorities deemed that a breach of regulations, so I took my case to court. To shave my beard, I argued, would constitute "tampering with and destroying evidence," since the actual perpetrators of the crime at the Lafayette Bar and Grill had been described as having only thin moustaches. My beard, therefore, became a testimony to and a symbol of my innocence. My argument was successful, establishing to the prison administration and the guards that I could use the law to protect my interests.

To deal with the constant hunger, I had to control my many cravings which meant controlling both body and mind. I had to overcome all of those things that advertise your hunger: the growling of your stomach or a headache or visions of your favorite foods. I became a fakir. Hunger and pain, to a fakir, can be controlled by the mind. The physical body knows nothing about pain, heat, cold, time or hunger, but the mind does. The mind then imposes its conditions upon the physical body, while our limits and our capacity to endure are far greater than we realize. Of course my career as a professional boxer, having the stamina and endurance to go the distance many times, came in handy in this

regard. The cartoon version of the fakir shows him lying on a bed of nails; there is more than a little Truth in this caricature.

Another form of self-discipline for me was commitment to a project, a goal to work towards, even if it seemed impossible to attain. I decided upon two projects with one goal: freedom. First, I became an expert in the field of criminal law. Second, I decided to write a book about my life. Actually, my first inkling about writing *The Sixteenth Round* occurred even before I went on trial in 1967. Arthur Dexter Bradley, one of the state's key witnesses, who was paid to testify against me, was being held on the third floor of the Passaic County Jail while I was down on the first floor. He and Hector Martinez, "The Motel Bandits," had a history of armed robberies up and down the coast of New Jersey. Bradley was brought into the jail from Bordentown Reformatory because the prosecutors were formulating their deals to convict me. Bradley was in the path of danger from two sides. First, the courts were planning to send him away for ninety years for his crimes if he refused to co-operate. But he was also in danger in the prison system, because everyone knew that my arrest was based on his lies. To ingratiate himself with me and the other prisoners, Bradley sent me notes that I was able to receive through the prison grapevine. From him I learned how the prosecution was going to proceed against me. I sent his notes to my lawyer, Raymond Brown. Had Bradley not sent me that information, we would have walked into the courtroom totally blind. The knowledge we gained saved Artis and me from being electrocuted. Those notes made me decide that if we were convicted, I would have to find a way to make our story known to the world outside the courtroom and the press. I said to Artis, "Okay, I got you in here, but I'm

going to get us out. I'm going to write a book and continue to work the law, and somehow I'll find a way to free us."

From that day on, I began keeping a journal. I wrote down my thoughts, my feelings, and my experiences, whatever details my memory could come up with. I figured that if I could train my body to become an elite, professional prizefighter, then I could also train my mind to study law and write a book.

Writing *The Sixteenth Round* was one of the most difficult tasks of my life. To begin with, prison was a rough place run by rough people I had known from previous brushes with the law. And they knew me. I was in solitary half the time, writing on anything I could find, envelopes or little pieces of toilet paper with the small nub of a pencil. I developed my own shorthand. Writing books had previously proven to be a risky business for people that the system earmarked as dangerous. George Jackson wrote *Soledad Brother* in 1970 and was killed in prison by the guards ten months after the book was published. In the movie, *The Hurricane*, you see Denzel Washington (playing me) in his cell with a typewriter. The film does not indicate, however, that typewriters at the time were only permitted for matters of the law. The only item of communication you were allowed in prison was a set of headphones for which you paid twenty-five dollars that were hooked up to the prison's radio with three stations. To get around the typewriter rule, I never let anyone read what I was writing. The guards, who were both intimidated by my presence and respectful of me, were happy enough to believe that it was just another legal brief. I would peck away on that big, old, black Underwood, transferring and adding to all the details from those ragged pieces of paper. If you've ever written anything in the dark, you know how bad the handwriting can appear when you are trying

to make sense out of it. Add to that the problem of the constant cell searches by the guards and having only one working eye and you can get some idea how arduous the process was. Even so, I was able to recapture my entire life in words, an accomplishment that provided the groundwork for the spiritual awakening I was to have after my second conviction.

Richard Solomon, an old acquaintance, was able to get the manuscript to Linda Yablonsky at Viking Press, and I was given a ten-thousand-dollar advance to complete the project. I still send copies of the book around the world, although it never ceases to amaze me that I really wrote it. Or that my name could be mentioned alongside the Claude Browns, the Eldridge Cleavers and the other good, angry, black writers of that time.

Not to say that I didn't have a little help in writing it. I only had an eighth grade education. Trenton State Prison and Rahway had other aspiring writers, there being an underground book industry growing in American prisons at the time, and we would help each other. Tommy Trantino, reputed to be a cop killer, wrote a group of short stories called *Lock the Lock* that was published four years after *The Sixteenth Round*. Frank Andrews, Al Dickens, I, and a few others wrote a prison short-story anthology, *Voices From the Big House*, that we published ourselves with help from David Rothenberg of the Fortune Society. Andrews was also writing his own book. Most of these guys had gone the same matriculation route through the prisons of New Jersey that I had, so we were basically self-taught. If I had writer's block, I would send the pages down to Andrews and he would get me straightened out. He also sent things to me and I would provide him with a fresh perspective on his material. It also helped that I had read a lot as

a child. Cowboy story writers such as Louie L'Amour impressed me by the way they could keep a story fresh and interesting through powerful metaphor. I tried to imitate his writing style. I found out recently that he was also a former boxer.

I used the book as a lifeline. After the fallout from the killing of George Jackson in California and as an indirect result of Watergate, prisons were less likely to kill you or hurt you if they knew that outsiders were paying attention. I had the book sent to influential people, hoping they might read it and respond with an offer of help. Once I got that treasured response, I grabbed on to that person, gently but firmly. That became the lifeline by which I slowly pulled myself up. When I got to the top of the walls, I saw in my mind's eye other wrongly convicted or persecuted people who were able to look out over their prison walls, Nelson Mandela, the Chicago Seven, Bobby Seale, all of us who would one day successfully transcend the confines and the culture of the prison.

The book was sent to Bob Dylan, Dyan Cannon, Muhammad Ali, Ellen Burstyn, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Harry Belafonte; anyone who could publicize the case, anyone who might be in a position to help me. When Dylan came home from England, he spent three days with me at Trenton State. I was naïve enough to feel confident that with all this high-profile assistance, there was no way they could possibly keep me in jail.

Alternatively, the book was meant to be a "letter in a bottle" which I threw out over the thirty-six-foot high walls into the ocean of life, hoping that somebody, anybody, perhaps a stranger, would find the bottle, read the message and come to help Artis and me. The letter in the bottle was to be the dominant metaphor for what actually happened with *The Sixteenth Round*. Not until Lesra Martin, a poor boy from Brooklyn, found the book at a Toronto library book sale, was I on the road to freedom...nine years later. That

is the kind of miracle which usually has to occur in the overturning of wrongful convictions.

Imagine what it means for a wrongly convicted prisoner to know that people on the outside have faith in him! Then imagine that those people are some of the best-known people in the world. The state authorities and those at the prison know that you can not just be made to fall off the map and disappear, that they must face the pressure of all those outside eyes on the inside. Then the judicial authorities know that they cannot bury you beneath a mountain of bureaucratic procedures, and that they have to, at some point, deal with your case. Then imagine what it means to have Muhammad Ali walk into a courtroom and plunk down the bail money for you and your co-defendant. All those opportunities were made possible only by the discipline of writing a book.

Another discipline I learned in prison was abstinence. In 1972, when the U.S. Supreme Court temporarily abolished the death penalty, Trenton State Prison still had a death house, twenty-eight isolated cells that had now been vacated. Because those who work the prison system are conduits of top-down information and rumor-mongers, prisoners know and feel what is going on in society even before those living out in society know. Prisoners can feel those ebbs and flows. When society becomes oppressive, prisoners are returned to stripes, chains, and shackles, isolation and violence. When the society became liberal, and those were liberal times, they turned the former death house into a contact visiting hall. The bars were removed and the prisoners went inside with their visitors. A lot of babies were conceived in that death house, which to me had become nothing more than a brothel. There were written rules against sexual intercourse as there always have been, but the authorities did not enforce them. Maybe

they figured that a prisoner who was able to have sex would be more pliable than a frustrated one. I found the whole practice completely disrespectful and would not allow my wife and child to visit me there. How degrading to pretend that a former death house where 160 tortured souls were put to death was a Shangri-La. Add to that the fact that you had to strip naked and have someone look up your butt before you were allowed the visit, and you can understand why I, as an innocent man, would find the whole charade repugnant.

Under the circumstances, I made a conscious decision to be celibate. The wonderful energy of sex is the most powerful energy to which a human being has access. That fact should come as no surprise since sex is the act through which life itself is sustained. Abstinence and celibacy, however, if practiced with a directed purpose, can gather up this energy that we normally expend so nonchalantly. I wouldn't even indulge in the prisoner's solace, masturbation. Whatever the prison allowed or encouraged, I did not want, since it would all be under their auspices and control. Human sexuality must take place in freedom unless you enjoy feeling like an animal in captivity. And love, how can one talk about love in such a place? Love is free, and it must remain free—or it is not love.

The monk and the priest are supposed to be celibate but this celibacy should not be seen, as it is by so many people, as an unnecessary punishment. There is nothing innately wrong with celibacy just as there is nothing innately wrong with sex. We are made to think that some priests are lecherous or prey upon children because their natural desires are suppressed, but I would say that if a priest is a womanizer or a pedophile, then that's the way he was before he became a priest. The real purpose of religious celibacy is

to create the inner fire of Spiritual liberation and crystallize one's many "I's" into one "I." The fire arises from the friction that comes from the struggle between celibacy and desire; between abstinence and the habitual behaviors that enslave us; between essence, which is real, and personality, which is not real. Ultimately, when the inner fire, the Spiritual fire, burns hot enough, what emerges from the ashes is positive energy of the Higher Mind.

All of these actions were connected, the training of my body through the discipline of denial, of my intellect through writing a book and studying the law, of my Spirit through the struggle with desire, through daily meditation, and through studying the works of the world's great minds. These actions or disciplines were steps along the way toward an idea of freedom that I could just then begin to imagine. It was a process in which I eventually learned, that even while inside a prison, there was no barrier in my life too great to ascend, too wide to get around, and that we lived in a Universe of unlimited possibilities.

In a very real sense, going to prison was the best thing that ever happened to me. Without it, I might never have stopped long enough on my journey to find out who I was. I would have been a bald-headed, mean-looking, ex-prizefighter talking through a screen of conditioning, spewing forth anger and bitterness. Nevertheless, prison is not an experience I would recommend to anyone else. Sacrificing your physical freedom is not a necessary step on the road to self-discovery. Far better that you start the process of finding yourself today while still outside those brick walls. Far better that you understand the Universal prison into which we are born. Start to find yourself by learning to control the habits that enslave you or the habits that may force additional prison time upon you.

You certainly don't want to be another number in the prison population. On this level of life, if your skin is of a certain hue, you'll suddenly discover what it's like to be part of a minority group. That's because keeping folks who look like me locked away inside those iron cages has become "big business". I'm old enough to remember when the prison system of the United States reflected its general population. If Italians, for example, were a certain percentage of the general population, that is roughly the percentage of Italians you would find in the prison population. So, needless to say, the prisoners were mostly white. They were served pasta fazool on Monday, shepherd's pie on Tuesday, Irish stew on Wednesday, and so on. The black folk caught hell from all sides, pure hell! In the 1950s, when segregation began to be challenged openly, the United States assimilated a lot of its white prison population back into society and began to fill the prisons up with people of color, mainly blacks, because blacks were telling them with more than just words, "We want to be able to eat in this restaurant; we want to drink out of this water fountain; we want to ride on the front of this bus; we want equal education; we want to make a decent living." The net was cast far and wide. Many young black men were arrested on petty or trumped-up charges, or crimes of the poor such as drug possession, prostitution or vagrancy. Drug offences now account for more than 25 per cent of the prison population, but if you add the property crimes and violent behavior of drug addicts to the total, it would be closer to 50 per cent.

For me, the drug problem in the U.S.A. mirrors the Opium Wars and the attempt by Great Britain to take over and subjugate China through the proliferation and trade of opium. Drugs destroy the body along with one's personal ambitions. Addiction creates numerous opportunities for exploitation. The society that is riddled with drugs usually

imprisons the small growers, the users, and the street peddlers, not the big importers or the drug companies who fatten the coffers of political parties. Where money is God, big money is omnipotent. The War on Drugs was and is a fantasy; the War on Drugs is just another war on the poor. All these wars, the War on Poverty, the War on Drugs, the War on Crime, and even the War on Terror, stem from a society hooked on war. Wherever war is declared, Truth, as it is said, is always the first casualty.

On this level of life, the holy trinity is property, privacy, and material success. Six and one half million mostly poor American people are under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system today. The cost of prison construction per year in the United States is over 2.5 billion dollars for state of the art penitentiaries. Almost seventy billion dollars is spent annually on prison operations. Who can resist the smell of all that money? That's why much of the system has been privatized. American justice is an oxymoron. It's big business. Behold, Lady Justice isn't blind! The dirty bitch has got dollar signs for eyeballs. It takes three billion dollars a year to house the 132,000 lifers alone. One-third of those serving life sentences are there for burglary and drug offences but are doomed by the "three strikes" law. This money might be better spent on programs to alleviate the conditions that breed crime, but then you would harm the profitable people-warehousing industry and its numerous employees. Since 1970, there has been an actual decline in the crime rate, but the prison population has swelled to six times the number. The cemeteries inside the prisons are growing in size because parole is harder and harder to obtain, and the writ of *habeas corpus* almost impossible. The politicians throw around prison-building contracts like candy on Halloween. Were it not for the out-of-the-way prisons on the back roads of America, many rural economies, which used to depend on small-scale

farming, would be hard pressed to keep their populations. In fact, urban criminals in these institutions are included in the rural census, giving these communities a disproportionate amount of political power. Of course prisoners are not allowed to vote.

Now I know that those who read these words may want to believe in the justice system, or may believe that the system is working to bring about a more just society, or that nothing is perfect, and so on. They may continue to believe in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that Africans in America are a criminal class of people, and that crime is a genetic trait of some sort. In response to these illusions, I'd like to point to another statistic which shows that the United States is not the only place where such things as "racial profiling" occur. In France, 10 per cent of the total population is Muslim, but 50 per cent of its prison population is Muslim, similar to the percentage of black people in the U.S. prison system based upon the overall population. The prison representation of Native populations in Canada and Australia is also largely disproportionate.

What I am saying here is that justice systems tend to function as a means of population control against a particular group; abstract notions of justice are a convenient fiction to hide behind. There may be good people within the system, but they are in no position to decide which acts constitute crimes and which crimes will send a person to jail. Possession of more than five grams of crack cocaine is a felony that draws a mandatory sentence of five years while possession of a hundred times more powdered cocaine, a drug that has worked its way into corporate offices, is a misdemeanor, punishable by no more than one year in prison, but in practice far less. Despite more or less equal drug use between blacks and whites, African Americans are thirteen times

more likely to wind up in jail. In New York, over 90 per cent of the people in prison under the Rockefeller drug laws are African American and Latino. Those laws, enacted in 1973, remove judicial discretion and require that the state hand out minimum prescribed jail sentences to anyone involved at any stage of the drug trade. As to dangerous drugs, cocaine and heroin are not as dangerous as Vioxx, an anti-inflammatory medication that may have been responsible for heart attacks in an estimated fifty to one hundred thousand cases. Until recently, an outright pardon or community service were given for white collar criminals, those for whom judges and lawyers said “a jail term would serve no purpose”. I always laughed when I heard that. There are only two purposes of incarceration: to hold you or to kill you—I defy anyone to prove otherwise. Any purpose that prisoners find in prison does not arise from the creators and administrators of the prison or its programs, but from themselves.

What we need to understand more than anything is that brutal or unnecessarily lengthy punishment in a hostile environment does nothing to alleviate the problem of crime. Execution does not serve this purpose either. To quote no less a thinker than Albert Einstein: “Problems cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness that created them.” I recognize that certain people need to be off the streets because they are a danger to society, but we must not delude ourselves into believing that we are doing anything more than punishing people in the most reactionary way. If a penal institution for youth such as Jamesburg School For Boys in New Jersey, with no holding cells, has an 82% recidivism rate, what can be expected of giant prison warehouses? If the prison system worked, then the United States of America would be the world’s safest place.

American prisons also kill. Diseases permeate these places; some are almost impossible to resist. Before my release from prison in 1985, a dangerous epidemic of tuberculosis broke out at Trenton State. Unbeknownst to me, I had contracted the germ which then laid dormant for seven years. In 1989, that old TB woke up and knocked me flat. I almost died. Then, after I had recovered, the TB germ attached itself to a stitch that had been negligently left in my eye during the botched prison operation. Now, two decades later, I had to have the whole eye removed. If you said I was lucky, that TB is better than contracting AIDS which has killed thousands of prisoners since 1985, you would be right. Because the prison population has a large percentage of intravenous drug users and persons who engage in homosexual activity, prisons are a high-risk environment for both HIV and hepatitis.

The conditions in a prison, even for those who abstain from drugs or sexual activity, foster the spread of illness. Prisons are crowded places, especially in the privatized world of the United States, where each prisoner means so many dollars. Individuals live side-by-side, stacked one on top of the other in five-by-seven-foot cages. The environment is not only enclosed but there is little ventilation. The prisoner can hear the person next door to him brush his teeth; he can hear and smell them going to the bathroom. When a cold or the flu starts to circulate or a prisoner or food worker has tuberculosis, the entire population is at high risk of contracting it too. Sadly, the only reason why anyone really cares about these epidemics is worry for the health of the guards and the prison administration.

I have heard from African American community leaders and others that the reason for the public's disregard for the welfare of people in prisons is racism. I want to draw a

distinction here between racism and tribalism. Tribalism is a better description of our group psychosis.

In our societies, people are conditioned along tribal lines. I use the word tribalism because racism presupposes that there is more than one race of people on this planet. That is just another lie we live with. There is only one race of people, the human race. We all belong to it. The drawing of artificial distinctions among people, and skin color is the most artificial of all, is the result of tribal conditioning. Tribes attempt to ensure the survival of people who look like them, act like them, smell like them, talk like them, or believe like them at the cost of any other segment of humanity. A tribal mentality divides people into opposites, black and white, French and English, rich and poor, Muslim and Christian, or any other unconscious way that divisions can be made. Only in the examples of language and religion are the differences more than superficial, although still not meaningful.

One day, I was flying back from the west coast, and in the seat pocket in front of me was a newspaper folded open to an Ann Landers column. In that column, Landers printed a poem by James Patrick Kinney (12) that fits perfectly with my understanding of tribalism. It was called "The Cold Within":

Six men trapped by happenstance
In dark and bitter cold;
Each one possessed a stick of wood,
Or so the story's told.

Their dying fire in need of logs,
The first man held his back,
For of the faces 'round the fire
He noticed one was black.

The next man looked across the way,
Saw one not of his church,

And couldn't bring himself to give
The fire his stick of birch.

The third man, dressed in tattered clothes,
Then have his coat a hitch.
Why should his log be given up
To warm the idle rich?

The rich man sat back thinking of
The wealth he had in store,
And how to keep what he had earned
From going to the poor.

The black man's face bespoke revenge,
While fire passed from sight,
Saw only in his stick of wood,
A way to spite the white.

The last man of this forlorn group,
Did nothing but for gain,
Give only unto those who gave
Was how he played the game.

The logs held firm in death-stilled hands
Was proof of human sin.
They died not from the cold without
But from the cold within.

That is the problem of tribalism and that will be its deadly, destructive consequences as long as people remain asleep. The poison from opposite sides of the fire seeps down into every aspect of human lives all over the world. In the world of wrongful convictions, my own included, injustices do not originate with the law itself, but with the tribalism of people who enforce the law and those who live under it. When tribes are continually at war, a wrongful conviction is nothing more than collateral damage. And don't ask about lethal prison conditions. Don't those people deserve it?

Prisons may not yet be concentration camps although they do share some of the same practices, virtual slave labor for one. Prison can destroy all that is valuable in a human being, be he innocent or guilty. He becomes an object to be guarded with a maximum of security and a minimum of compassion. He has a number, albeit not branded on the arm, by which he is referred. He is caged, kept, and counted. Cruelty, humiliation, degradation and constant danger are so destructive to his psyche that they don't need to actually kill him.

In all ways possible, those behind bars are dehumanized. All the prisoner's decision-making powers are taken away. He is told when to eat and how fast, when to sleep and for how long, when to leave his cell, when to go back in. He might get to decide whether to exercise or whether to stand up or sit down in his cell. But once released, if he is lucky enough, he is expected to act normally, to be self-sufficient, as though he had just nipped out to the corner store for a newspaper and didn't return for twenty years. As if he is not suffering from mental disorders like post-traumatic stress, depression and disassociation. Do you wonder why released prisoners, offered little counseling and less opportunity, tend to become drug addicts and pushers, if they haven't already become that while behind bars?

Don't forget either the terrible toll imprisonment takes on families, friends, relationships. Children—how do they come to terms with the disappearance of fathers and mothers who seem to have abandoned them? And parents—how do they continue to believe in their children when the system says that they are criminals?

Young people living on the streets or in desperate circumstances look around them and see poverty, violence, and despair. On television and in film, they have seen the

lives of people far better off than themselves. Even on the streets, they see the drug dealers, the hustlers, the supposed success stories in their neighborhoods, driving around in Mercedes and BMWs. The message to them is clear: “It’s okay to get anything you want, any way you can.” They arm themselves. They live by codes that are throwbacks to the Wild West. “Disrespect” them and you’ll be shot. God help innocent bystanders or anybody who talks to the police. These young people go on to fill up the beds in the emergency wards of our hospitals, the training schools, the penitentiaries, the death rows and the cemeteries.

Is there some master plan at work here? Could it be that the need to fill the prisons is the cause both of the numerous wrongful convictions and the lack of opportunity in the black communities? At least that would explain the punitive drug laws in the United States and the Three-Strike programs, which after three convictions of any sort can land a person in jail for life. In reality, though, I do not think that I am talking here about intended policy. If it were intentional, it would not have “succeeded” to the degree that it has. More likely, these things happen not by design but by the kind of unconscious human insanity that dominates everything on this level of life. Governors, presidents, legislators and judges actually believe or have convinced themselves that they are being “tough on crime.” When you get right down to brass tacks, all it really means is hurting others of a different tribe. But those who bring forth and pass such policies have to also live with the consequences of these policies.

Most prisoners will eventually return to society at least once or twice. They will not come back as reformed, gentle souls. Through contact with others in the system, they might even have learned to be better criminals. Once prison has robbed them of their self-

respect, they will no longer have any respect for you, your life or your property, especially if employment is shut off by criminal labeling; they are denied the right to vote and no counseling awaits them on the outside. If a person is treated as though he were inhuman and he then behaves inhumanly, should we be surprised? Should you be surprised if he fails to respect your rights? Stripped of his humanity, he has no problem taking your valuables or your life. When we make it impossible for people to be anything but criminals, they tend to live down to our beliefs; when we encourage, work with, and believe in them, they tend to rise to our expectations.

It is a somewhat hopeless picture I have painted here, but an optimist like I am might also say that the picture represents the necessary conditions for awakening. The election of Barack Obama to the presidency is a significant moment in history, a crossroads where people can go in entirely opposite directions. As an African American, his very election is a blow to tribalism, but the potential to subvert this opportunity is immense. Young people, not scarred by the bitter racial divisions of past years, made Obama's election possible. With the many problems he faces, none may be greater than the expectations of black people. Africans in America, who have suffered disproportionately from a flawed justice system, expect to see the system become less punitive and more responsive. He will face enormous opposition.

For many of those wrongly convicted who have tried in vain to tweak the system, hopelessness can only be vanquished by the most intensive efforts. Their numbers are great; it is estimated by differing researchers at the American Bar Association that between 0.5 percent to 10 percent of all criminal convictions are in error or anywhere from seven thousand five hundred to one hundred thousand people *per year*. Hope for

them is not to be found in the abstractions of the law, since blind justice is a fiction. Hope comes not from within the system but within the self.

I tell prisoners that the only thing you can change on this planet is yourself. You cannot change another single thing. You can't change your mother, your father, your wife, your husband or your children. You can't change your ancestors. You cannot change the government in anything but name. But you do have the possibility of changing yourself. The miracle I discovered in prison is that when you change, the world around you also changes; it is in fact the only way the world can change.