

THANKSGIVING DAY 2014

By DARIN BUFALINO

Let me share with you some of things I am thankful for this Thanksgiving Day. Before I do, some will recall after seeing the by-line that I have been quiet lately, today I am putting pen to paper in an effort to dissipate an explosive amount of negative energy into something positive.

The day starts off in typical fashion with this remark, " You F-ing guys don't know how good you have it, just imagine if you were in one of those foreign prisons, you think you would be fed as well ?" "coming from one of the many "Mensa" members moonlighting as a Massachusetts Department of Corrections correctional officer. Full dis-claimer, I am presently serving a state sentence (MCI Shirley), as well as having served time in a federal penitentiary(USP Lewisburg), and I had the misfortune of spending almost 4 years in one of " Those Foreign Prisons" (Carabenchel, Spain). So I do not need to imagine anything. What I have a hard time imagining is why this obviously ill informed correctional officer who was only 45 minutes into his shift would purposely antagonize an inmate population already downtrodden on this holiday which has come to represent the reuniting of family from far flung places together at the dinner table.

On any other day this prison guard would be spouting his usual refrain " You don't like it, don't come to prison ! ". In the paragraph above I referred to this guard as a genius and I will explain my reasoning shortly.

All agree the system is broken, mass incarceration does not make our communities safer-just the opposite. There are many points of view on how to fix the system, none of which will work because of the politics of mass incarceration and the fact incarcerating men and women in this country is big business, big money and big profits.

As a prisoner I have spent many days of my life in vain, attempting to find a way to fix or beat the system and have no doubt I am not the only one out of the 2 million plus incarcerated here in the United States who has wasted so much of my life in that attempt.

It is Thanksgiving day, last night speaking with my wife on the telephone and learning where all of our extended family would be, it was decided I would call this morning at 10:30. calling at this time would enable me to say hello to family members who for one reason or another I normally would be unable to talk to on the phone. I awoke this morning looking forward to that call and speaking with family who I might not have spoken to since last year and some who might not be on this earth for the next holiday.

Imagine my anguish when at 10:30 the announcement is made without warning to lock in, prisoners lock into your cells. Why? so staff on duty may enjoy a turkey dinner !!! unlike the moonlighting "Mensa" member I am not going to begrudge a few slices of turkey to anyone. What does upset me is the fact that prison administration and correctional officers are so ignorant and have no compassion or human dignity towards prisoner's families and even less towards prisoners. Prison staff had before hand knowledge that the morning recreation period and access to the telephones would be terminated earlier than usual- yet in their belligerent and vindictive manner purposely withheld that information to the prisoner population. They knew thousands upon thousands of prisoner's relatives were waiting for that call that would not be coming.

As anyone who has experienced it, if you have a loved one in prison and he/she says they will call at a specific time and then do not call, all types of scenarios are played out as to why that call was not made. none of them provide a warm and fuzzy feeling, just the opposite dread and apprehension, prison staff know this yet not only was the telephones turned off at 10:30, access to them that normally would have started at 1 p.m. was delayed until well after 2 p.m. To the uninformed citizen this may seem trivial but placed together with similar abuse on prisoners and their families a clear pattern emerges that even a person of biased opinion would have to admit

is wrong and can only be condoned by the morally corrupt.

So while I sit in my cell fuming over yet another day of total disrespect towards my family and me as prison staff enjoy a free taxpayer funded holiday meal, my family members joyfully await my call which then turns into worry and fear turning what should have been a pleasant family gathering into a stressful meeting of negative thoughts.

I am thankful for my family who are forced to tolerate endless indignities foisted upon them at every opportunity by DOC employees yet continue to support and refuse to abandon me at the gate of the DOC abyss.

I am thankful for my family and friends who in these tough economic times sacrifice in order to send me money in order to purchase toiletries from a contract vendor at inflated prices who then kicks back to the DOC a portion of those purchases.

I am thankful for my wife who sacrifices to make sure I have the money to ensure it is possible for me to stay in contact by telephone through a contract vendor who then kicks back to the DOC part of the inflated price it charges prisoners.

I am thankful for family and friends especially my wife who after spending hours driving, spending hard earned money for gasoline and either taking time off from work or from their days off to come to prison and spend time with me, re-establishing human contact and strengthening relationships. They continue to do so despite the lack of respect shown by DOC employees who show their contempt by steadfastly harrassing visitors at every turn, refusing to process visitors in a timely fashion without justification, by refusing entrance to visitors who have patiently sat for hours waiting to be processed only to be told arbitrarily their clothing is inappropriate despite the fact the clothing in question on many occasions previously had been worn into the institution without issue. As well as disgracefully directing females of all ages to partially undress, manipulate bra and breasts all within view of male staff-unexcusable in any context.

Speaking of visits I guess I should be thankful that the DOC or a contract vendor has not instituted some type of scheme where a fee is imposed in order to visit a loved one in prison. As it is the exorbitant prices charged to purchase a snack or beverage in the visiting room vending machines are yet another tax on the poor. This time the kick back on the inflated prices goes directly to the guards, not the DOC, to be spent on whatever nice thing they would like.

I am thankful for the extremely broad and powerful backs of my family and friends, which not only support me but the DOC and its employees.

I am thankful for not having a serious illness while incarcerated. Having witnessed first hand men dying for lack of proper care while the DOC and its contract health care provider laugh behind closed doors at prisoners with fullblown dementia sitting in an adult diaper full of feces talking to himself.

And at last I am thankful for that " Mensa " genius this morning in the chow hall. The key we have all been searching for has been found. JUST DO NOT COME TO PRISON !!!!!!! Here is how to beat the system that continues to abuse and disrespect prisoners and their families. For the over 90 % of incarcerated men and women in this country who will be released at some point do whatever it takes not to come back to prison. The existence of the DOC and its abusive staff depend on occupied prisons. If convicted felons as a group do not recidivate thereby lowering the numbers in the system, staffing numbers will fall meaning less disrespectful guards with less administrators condoning their behavior. Less visitors, less phone calls and less commissary purchases equals less money taken from our families to support the PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX.

For those prisoners who are serving life sentences this paradigm shift will mean better conditions and treatment. Doc employees will turn on themselves once positions become limited-unlike today where openings in corrections are abundant. Less money spent on the DOC is more that can be spent on education, the better educated the less chance of going to prison.

I am looking forward to next Thanksgiving, I am hoping many will give thanks for reading this article and acting on it.

Darin Bufalino is due to be released in 2017. His family and friends are anxiously awaiting his return to society and as they have done during his incarceration plan on supporting him in becoming a productive member of the community. More importantly he has a plan and that plan does not include ever letting the DOC abuse him or his family again.

For all you " Mensa " members who want to know, barring some torture palace in the Siberian tundra, food in foreign prisons is: not processed by-products, cost effective meal replacements or some other kind of artificial substance dished out by a contract vendor. It may only be rice and beans but it is wholesome and natural.