

## PARADE OF THE LIVING DEAD

by Timothy J. Muise

\* \* \* \* \*

I recently had some medical problems, always scary but even more scary in the prison environment where we are almost always subjected to substandard care, and these medical problems forced me to be around the hospital unit here at the state prison in Shirley. One day while waiting in the "cage" where all prisoners wait for treatment I saw a parade of old men emerge from the bowels of the hospital unit. These six men looked like a parade of the living dead as they shuffled out to get their medication in the medical line here at the prison (think of the medication line scene in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest"). I had a very real and visceral reaction at this site: disgust and anger. What are these octogerians still doing in prison? All of these men were over 80 years old and two had to lean on wheelchairs as make-shift walkers. A sour build up in the pit of my stomach built up to a volcanic eruption of disgust. This is what corrections in Massachusetts has come to: a torturous system where men are kept well past their ability to be any type of threat so that hoards of guards and administrators can keep their jobs and ensure jobs for their offspring.

Now it is real easy for me to fly off into some anger filled diatribe about layabout guards, unqualified and uncaring prison administrators, or any of the other destined for failure aspects of the Massachusetts prison system, but I am going to do my best to refrain from that. What I want to focus on is the need for humanity in this system. You hear and read each and everyday about social decline and human indifference. It seems to me that stories of real compassion and love are rapidly becoming more and more the atypical scenario. With political correctness such a behavior

modifying mantra these days there are very few classes of the weak upon which people can visit injustice. One of those classes is the prisoner. Now do not get me wrong: there are human beings that are so flawed, so destructive to society that they must be kept segregated from the masses. In what way and for how long is a story for another time, but I just cannot see any caring society, once they are enlightened on the true depth of the topic, agreeing that keeping dying old men behind bars until they rot to death - at an unbelievable cost: both financial and social, is the way to go. The immediate damages are clear to me from my viewpoint on the prison hill. First, the prison population sees that their future could well hold them being hidden away in the bowels of some dark prison hospital, adult diaper full of feces, just praying that someone would clamp the pillow down over their face. This creates such an attitude of hopelessness in the prison system that men become entrenched in true despair: they feel they "can't" succeed. When you instill that self-defeatist attitude in the prison population you wind up with the 47% recidivism rate we have here in the commonwealth - one in two come back to prison (after visiting more harm upon society).

The next major damage is that the prison employee, from the hospital worker and mental health counselor to the line guard and administrator, develops a feeling that the prisoners are less than human. When they see men (and women) being dehumanized day in and day out they cannot help but view their captives as some sort of animal. With that perspective you can never create an environment conducive to rehabilitation: you can never achieve that "I can" state of mind that would overcome the "I can't" mindset I alluded to previously.

When you have both the prisoner and the jailer in mindsets of defeat how can we ever even imagine that the system would produce anything but failure? The Parade of the Living Dead has such deep and scarring effects, through the hopelessness it embeds this system with, that we must do something about it. It is clear that the financial and social costs are too high and the answer must be that we employ a real system of compassionate medical release. Some people wonder how these releases would actually save money as "someone" would have to pay for the care of these aging prisoners. That answer is very easy: you get an immediate elimination of security costs. Whenever one of these aging prisoners has to be transported to the outside hospital they must be accompanied by two paid security staff members. Oftentimes they have to be transported by independently contracted ambulances which are extraordinarily expensive. You see these hospital units do not have the specified care staff that a nursing home or managed care facility would have so each time one of these elderly prisoners needs the care of a specific specialist they are sent out (many times in a private contractors ambulance) to an outside hospital with two guards riding along who are oftentimes being paid overtime. The burden on the taxpayer is overwhelming, approximately \$98,000,000.00 was spent on health care last year, but the even deeper tragedy is that it is all so unnecessary. With a viable compassionate/medical release measure these elderly prisoners could be properly treated at a drastically reduced cost to the taxpayer, and this commonsense practice (commonsense practices are more often the exception rather than the rule in corrections) would allow hope within the walls to build. Men and women may not see their future as one of

despair and hopelessness in our state prisons allowing for the "I Can" attitude to breath that rarefied air of hope that has such a hard time penetrating the bars and razor wire that confine flesh and blood just as surely as they can confine heart and soul. Fill the heart with real hope and the soul will foster change. Your streets will be safer and your children will live in a world that values the protection of the truly downtrodden. Our sacred American values, those of redemption and second chances, will be honored through such compassion, and our children will know that all human dignity, even the human dignity of the prisoner, must be respected.

I ask that you please contact your local state representative and state senator and let them know that you support State Senator Patricia Jehlen's bill for the medical release of prisoners: Senate Bill No. #1139. Tell them that you respect the dignity of all persons and want them to ensure that such respect is passed on through the law of the land here in the commonwealth. The choice is yours: do you support the Parade of the Living Dead or do you support the hope that can change our troubled society? Please vote for hope.

About The Author: Timothy J. Muise is a prisoner rights activist who has written extensively about the failures of the prison system and there impact on society. Tim is the current director of Bread & Water as well as an avid blogger at: <http://betweenthebars.org/blogs/101/>