



One Day In The Life Of a Prisoner

By Jeffrey Deskovic

As many are well aware, I was incarcerated from December, 1990 until September, 2006 - a total of 16 years - for a rape and murder of which I would go on to be proven innocent through DNA. In the course of imprisonment, I would both experience, and witness, the indifference, at best, and inhumanity and abuse, at worst; treatment that the correction officers, civilian staff, and the prison administration doled out to inmates. As I see it, talking respectfully, treating humanely, and recognizing basic human rights, could and should be a part of operating a prison while making sure that inmates do not escape. After all, prisoners are sent to prison as punishment, not for punishment. Yet, that is not the way it works out.

I would like to share an experience

which, to this day, bothers me whenever I think about it, because it was so unnecessary.

In 1996 word reached me that my grandmother was on her deathbed. The chaplain who informed me of the fact advised me that I could request to go see her. I had two choices: I could either go to the funeral, or I could ask for a deathbed visit, but not both. Once I decided, he would then fill out the request form and submit it to the superintendent, who would then decide if he was willing to allow me to go.

It was a quandary deciding which to do. I could elect to see her in the hospital while she was in a coma, and therefore unaware that I was there, but nonetheless, still alive. Or, I could go to the church service to be held for her upon her death, thus also seeing family

members who I had not seen or heard from in years, and in many cases had not seen at all in the 6 years I had already been in prison.

The thought crossed my mind that this could be my only opportunity to see them. After all, I was serving a life sentence, and although I always had hope I would be cleared, it was far from certain that that would ever happen. At the same time, I knew that, barring a miracle, those who I had not had any contact with during those six years were not going to come and visit me. I remember thinking, "Why do I have to make a choice? Would it really kill them to let me go to both events?" It would be so simple, yet such human consideration was seen as unwarranted. After all, I was a prisoner, not a human being.

Despite the implications of the choice either way, I had to decide pretty quickly, before the decision was taken from me by her passing away. In the end, I decided that I would rather see her alive one last time.

The day I went to see her did not start out well. It would take about 4 to 4 1/2 hours to get from Elmira Prison to the hospital in Peekskill where she lay in a coma. And so, therefore, we would be leaving in the morning, before the population was served breakfast. The procedure was that the officers were given money to purchase meals for themselves and for me. We stopped at a delicatessen, and they purchased breakfast for themselves, purchasing only coffee for me, however. I am prone to motion sickness, and one of the procedures to prevent yourself from get-

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ting sick is to eat. The absence of food led to my getting sick in the car. Two or three times they had to stop because I was about to throw up. Yet, it was like dry heaves because there was nothing in my stomach. In addition, while I was out of the car to throw up, I was left in chains, handcuffs, and leg irons.

I was unable to move my hands more than a inch or two. Considering that if they did take the handcuffs off that I would still have the leg irons on, and that both officers carried side arms, where could I possibly have gone? What was the security risk?

The car itself was way too hot and stuffy. The windows were not rolled down even an inch, nor was the air conditioner turned on. The air conditioner was turned on in the front of the car but, because there was plexiglass separating the back from the front, none of it reached me. The sun was out, and was beaming through the windows. All of it had the combined effect of making me nauseous for the entire 4 1/2 hour ride.

I was used to not being treated humanely by the correction officers, so I did not say anything to them. I knew from past experience that expressing discomfort could lead to being treated even worse.

When we arrived at the hospital, instead of the officers parking the car near the sidewalk in front of the hospital, they parked far away. When they got out of the car and opened my door, I looked at them expectantly, waiting for them to take the handcuffs, chain, and leg irons off of me, so I could go into the hospital with some dignity. However, they did not do that. They did not even throw the thin jacket they had over the cuffs so as to disguise that I had them on, thus giving me some modicum of dignity. Instead, I was paraded through the parking lot, and the hospital corridors, like some kind of an animal.

The desk attendant did a double-take at the sight of me. Then there was a woman in the hospital who was in the waiting area with her daughter, who could not have been more than 3 or 4 years old. When the child started running in my general direction, the mother quickly

grabbed her, bringing her close, as though I might be some kind of monster who would suddenly commit a spontaneous violent act right there on the spot.

I remember feeling both embarrassed, and also thinking how ironic that it was that I would be in all of these manacles, with 2 guards, and have a child pulled close to her mother out of fear, and yet I was innocent. As we walked by a pay phone, I remarked to one of the officers that I was glad that there was a phone in our path to my grandmothers room, because if my mother was not visiting her, I could call her collect and tell her that I was there, so she could come and see me. However, I was informed that I was not allowed to use the phone even though if there was someone visiting my grandmother I would be able to talk with them. Fortunately for me, a family friend had briefly stopped to see my grandmother a few minutes before I got there, and called my mother for me enabling me to see her. If he had not, I would have missed an opportunity to see her without her having to travel the 4 1/2 hours it took to get from Peekskill to Elmira.

When I reached my grandmother's room, they left the chain and handcuffs on me for a good 10 minutes, which resulted in my having the chain on the side of the bed. Finally, they removed

them.

After one hour they made me leave. That ridiculous time allotment - doubtlessly arrived at arbitrarily by the rule makers, meant that we would travel for 9 hours total in order to visit with someone for one hour. Once again they dressed me up in all of the manacles and paraded me through the hospital and parking lot. I was mortified. On the way back, unlike "breakfast" which had consisted of a cup of coffee, I actually got to eat something. But once again I had to deal with the uncomfortableness of the hot and stuffy car. Since the windows had not been rolled down even a little while I was in the hospital, the car had become even more heated standing in the sun.

During those 10 hours out of the prison, I had adjusted to being in a different environment. It actually had felt physically different, like freedom was a sensation, and the air somehow was different, and I had adjusted. It felt strange being in prison again, like it was some alternate world I was suddenly in. In many ways, mentally, I stepped back from all of the routines, expectations, and concepts that the prisoners and staff buy into which go into everyday life

in prison, in just those ten hours away.

That night in my cell, as I heard the normal sounds of the prison - the prisoners making noise, yelling, radios blasting, cell doors shutting as prisoners went into their cells and slammed the door which the rules obligated them to do, and I heard the oversized keys jingle, the ones used to open and close the lockboxes containing the levers that open the cells, and I saw guard making their rounds and looking into the cells. It was somewhat reminiscent of people looking at caged animals in a zoo. It struck me, for the first time in a long while, just how bizarre the reality in prison was, and that I did not belong in that strange world; and yet, nonetheless, I was in it because although I was innocent, I had been found guilty and had been unable, to that point, to get any court to side with me, despite having gone through some litigation in the appellate process. ■

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