

Tuesday, October 31, 2006

When governments cage people / See this powerful video.

On this Halloween day, here is some chilling reality, mixed with hope: Jails and prisons are cages that warehouse and restrain legions of people (1) presumed innocent and awaiting trial, (2) who are innocent but wrongfully convicted, (3) convicted of crimes that should not be crimes in the first place or should be heavily decriminalized, (4) sentenced too harshly (e.g., draconian mandatory minimum sentences for nothing worse than an addict who -- a second time around -- gets caught selling one crack cocaine rocks in exchange for a one-rock commission for every three rocks sold), (6) unfairly thrown back in jail and prison for probation and parole violation findings, often being sent back for too long, (7) dehumanized in the court system and dehumanized in jail, (8) suffering from racism from prison authorities, government authorities and fellow inmates, (9) sitting on death row under a system of legalized government-sponsored murder, and (10) fattening government revenues through prison labor ranging from manufacturing license-plates to providing outsourced telephone customer service from within the prison walls, because prison labor is cheap and captive. The United States has so many prisoners that the prison system -- and court, "criminal justice", prosecutor, and police systems that prosecute and sentence prisoners -- is so economically and socially entrenched that too many prisoners become mere numbers in too many people's eyes. The more that everyone knows each prisoner as an individual human being, and the prisoner's story, the more humanely prisoners and ex-prisoners will be treated by society, by the court system, by the prison system, and by the rest of the overgrown government bureaucracy. This is not to detract whatsoever from the humanity that is due to crime victims and everyone else; everyone must be treated with humanity -- including criminal suspects, defendants, and prisoners -- for us to have a humane society. While I believe that prisons have their places -- but that they have been overused and abused for too long -- my friend Jun Yasuda takes a more radical -- or perhaps more hopeful -- approach than mine. Jun-san -- who has been on many a peace walk for prisoners, and has vigiled and fasted for Mumia Abu Jamal (a days-long fast ingesting nothing but a drink of water at the midpoint) -- says: "All living things are sacred. Punishment is no solution; putting people in cages is no solution; more killing is no solution. These things happen because of fear. We believe in taking care of each other in a human way, with compassion." The time to start taking care of our fellow human beings is from birth, continuing to all stages of life. This can be done without instituting more socialism, and without enforcing social engineering, so long as more people help others from the goodness of their hearts, rather than living isolated lives of going to work, providing for their families, staying wired to the Internet and their home entertainments systems, and doing nothing else to better society. As to racism and the prison system, the more overt racism that previously existed in the prison system was not fully eliminated by the integration of prisons and sensitivity training seminars, just as racism in the rest of society did not go away -- but overall reduced and became less virulent -- merely due to *Brown v. Board of Education* and other court and government actions. Racism might never go away entirely, but we all must work to eliminate it. A picture tells a thousand words. Here is a documentary of segregated black prison work crews in 1966. Here is a shorter YouTube clip; the full version is here. Thank you to GFB's Scott Henson for blogging about this documentary. From <http://www.folkstreams.net/film,122> : Afro-American Work Songs in a Texas Prison. by Bruce Jackson, Toshi Seeger, Peter Seeger, and Daniel Seeger You can make a difference in providing compassion and more humanity for prisoners. After all, accumulated feathers still sink the boat. Every little bit helps, and every larger step helps all the more, including getting on the backs of your lawmakers and the other government powers that be; spreading the word of justice for prisoners and criminal defendants to your family, friends and acquaintances; and visiting inmates (and even offering to provide them classes in your areas of strength, be it academic, creative, supportive, or otherwise) and giving them moral support. The Human Kindness Foundation has an excellent webpage about how to easily arrange to visit with inmates and what to do with the visits, and sends the following message through its director: "What can you do? First of all., if you become the victim of a crime, insist upon meeting your assailant. Insist upon being involved with the process of his or her restoration. Join or create a VORP (Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program) in your community. Tour your local jail or prison to see firsthand what your taxes pay for. Go in with a church or civic group to meet inmates. Become a pen pal to a prisoner who is seeking to change his/her life. Talk to your friends and colleagues about employing ex-cons (in nationwide surveys, most employers admit they won't hire a person with a criminal record, so where are they supposed to work?). Reclaim your power and your responsibility, because the retributive system you have deferred to is not serving your best interests. Please take the issue of crime and punishment personally, because it is an issue which definitely affects you and your family and your descendants for generations to come. "We have to realize that we are all a part of this problem. If you vote, if you pay taxes, if you are afraid to walk alone at night, you are already involved. And so we have a choice to be involved solely in negative, destructive ways, such as home security systems, car alarms, personal weapons, etc., or in constructive ways which might actually change the problems. We all must make real changes -- not just political ones, but also in our personal attitudes and lifestyles. America will not thrive, nor will we and our children be happy, by becoming a nation behind bars." (From webpage of the Human Kindness Foundation's Prison Ashram Project, <http://www.humankindness.org/project.html>).

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Posted by Jon Katz in Criminal Defense at 00:00