Notes from a Corrections Officer

Winslow Holman

PRE-READING:

1. What do you think are the main challenges that corrections officers face on the job?
2. Do you know anyone who worked in corrections? What was their experience like?

Earning Respect in the “Killing Fields”

The maximum security prison I worked in was nicknamed the “Killing Fields.” We were required to wear a vest every day to protect us from knife attacks. This particular morning had gone rather well. I had spent the morning on my tier, always on high alert, but there had been no problems. During lunch break, a Corrections Officer (CO) can lower his guard for a minute. But during lunch, the intercom in the cafeteria went off, “FIGHT IN BUILDING ‘G’ DAYROOM!”

Off we went, running from the cafeteria to building “G.” I ran up the stairs to the top level of the dayroom. Little did I know I would run right into the middle of a brawl. I politely asked the inmates to stop three times, to no avail, so I intervened. A few seconds later, I was on top of one inmate and, thank God, my backup froze the other inmates in place. Things were defused and we headed to “Sick Bay” to get checked out.

As I walked past the yard, I saw inmates lined up at the fence eyeballing me pretty hard. My first thought was, “Now I am a target.” But instead, I heard, “Pops, we didn’t know you carried it like that!” I didn’t know what they were talking about. At the debriefing, the video showed what I had done and how 20 years of martial arts training came into play. But the video also showed that I used restraint. I didn’t hurt anyone, even though I could have caused a lot more damage.

From that point on, I had the inmates’ respect. I could do things that other officers couldn’t when it came to dealing with inmates. The inmates would say, “Pops is real. He ain’t one of those John Wayne wannabes.” I think the inmates understood that I respected a man for what he showed me, not what he was convicted for.

Dehumanizing Rules

In prison, the rules are designed to dehumanize the prisoner. As a CO, I was on the front lines of enforcing those rules. So did the job dehumanize me too? I tried not to let it.

Take for example, the process of “receiving” new prisoners. Receiving is the transition from freedom into incarceration. You remove your clothing, you are showered and sanitized, your body cavities are checked for contraband, and you are given a colored jumpsuit.

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and a pair of rubber shower shoes.

This is a dehumanizing process in itself, but the cavity search adds insult to injury. And a CO has it in his power to make it even worse. The cavity search can go one of two ways:

1) you start at the head and work your way down the inmate’s body.
2) you start at the bottom and work your way up the inmate’s body.

Some COs would use the second way just for the sake of a laugh. He would make the prisoner spread his butt cheeks and then put his fingers in his mouth. I personally never added this extra humiliation to the cavity search.

My rules as a tier officer were the same rules I was raised on and live by to this very day. As a baby-boomer of color, I was born in segregation and grew up into integration. We were taught a few things to survive, like “Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words could never hurt others as you would have them do unto you.” Another saying we lived by was, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

I was not the type of CO the desk jockeys liked. But inmates and fellow officers loved having me on the tiers. When I left one prison, the inmates actually wrote their own Letter of Appreciation stating I was truly fair and firm and treated everyone with the respect they earned. All the inmates housed in that area signed that letter.

That’s one of my truly valued documents. Twenty-two years later it still sits with my cherished memories.

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**POST-READING:**

1. Use context clues to figure out the meaning of the following phrases: John Wayne wannabe, baby-boomer, and desk jockeys.

2. Why do you think the rules are designed to dehumanize the prisoner?

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**Your Job and You**

*Read the article* by Winslow Holman on p. 44. Find specific things that Winslow does to keep from dehumanizing the prisoners (and himself in the process).

**What do you think** it would be like to work as a prison guard? What would you do, if you were a prison guard, to keep from dehumanizing yourself and the prisoners?

**Have you ever had a job** where the pressures of the job made you do things or act certain ways that you did not like? What did you do about it?

**Interview your classmates** and explore this topic with them.

**Write your own essay.** Describe some of the pressures of work. And describe people’s strategies for surviving those pressures. Draw from Winslow’s essay, your own experience, and your classmates’ experiences. Cite this article and your interviews as sources.