

## **No One Trusts Their Enemies!**

*Confronting The Process of Psycho-social Alienation*

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*"The time judges gave us  
In trying to save us  
Does more to deprave us  
Than crimes real or thought,  
For here we get hazy  
Progressively crazy  
Obsessively lazy  
Regressively wrought."*

Dennis Sobin  
Louisiana State Penitentiary

The Buddha said that the greatest gift is the gift of truth---and I truly believe this to be so. Therefore my ambition today is to tell you the truth. Obviously my version of truth is not the universal form the Buddha related to. Instead it is relative truth based on my limited experiences and understanding. But it is intended as my gift to you and offered with great respect. If I seem at times brash and overbearing, it is a reflection of my history as both a client and practitioner in this nasty business. And if my anger seems to leap out at you, it is a result of the agony that comes with being able to hear the combined silent screams of the 1.6 million persons locked in cages in this nation.

So, what is this supposed "truth" I bring you? I begin with the obvious: we work in a massive self-perpetuating industry dedicated to punishment and pain. This singular reality brings with it a profound impact on the minds and lives of all involved, *the keepers right along with the kept*. By its very nature, exercising dominance over the fate of fellow beings is an arbitrary undertaking, subject to significant misjudgments and/or cumulative damage. This is compounded by a willful intent to reduce offenders to a level of base servitude for the purpose of control. And, unfortunately, we are far better at taking people apart than we are at putting them together. Thus our system of justice helps perpetuate the very demon which no one wants to face: *repeat crime*.

This is not to imply that offenders come to us perfect and functional, only to be torn asunder by the correctional process. *Not at all!* As you well know, most of our clients germinate out of environments absent adequate structure, basic discipline and pro-social values. But, no matter what the nature of the breeding ground, be it Los Angeles or Leavenworth, we all share a primary responsibility to confront the implications and impact of psycho-social alienation. To this end, we must become far more alert and competent in efforts to reduce its damage on ourselves, right along with those we seek to guide and enhance.

Another "truth from Rollo": across two centuries of American corrections, security has been treated as a God, while treatment is regarded as an ugly step-child. Why? Because the operational foundation of all correctional activity is a chronic, unrelenting imbalance of power and control. And I suggest this imbalance is both inappropriate and counter-productive. "Inappropriate" in that it flies in the face of 5,000 years of recorded theological teachings and direct experience. And "counter-productive" in that it inevitably results in a set of highly negative, non-conscious coping behaviors which act to isolate the powerless and pit him or her against the universe.

For you, dedicated by conviction and profession to positive development of your clients, this fact sets the stage for a long menu of conflict and frustration. To get a better handle on this powerful dynamic, I would like to focus our combined attention on the dynamic nature and effects of **alienation**.

Some of the ways we humans react are modern in that they are in response to our time and place in history. But, for the most part, we function from a primitive dynamic or operating system that regulates the deepest aspects of how we process this overall experience we call "life."

Alienation, as a personal and social phenomenon, is one of the oldest and most deeply rooted reactions of human nature. Inevitably tied to a battle for power and control, one of our first documented accounts of formal alienation occurred in the Garden of Eden, soon followed by the deadly conflict between Cain and Abel, and it has been picking up speed ever since! Indeed, alienation is so prevalent and fundamental that we take it for granted. Thus it exerts monumental power at a non-conscious level, being invisible and thus invulnerable until brought out of darkness and into the light of awareness, reason, and purposeful change.

We all witness the delusions and maladaptive thinking often displayed by our clients. But one of the most critical and far-reaching perceptions of most offenders during and following captivity is the status of acute detachment. This is built on a fundamental sense of being totally adrift in space. I'm referring to persons who view themselves as cut off from the brotherhood of man---isolated and devoid of anchorages and absent a sense of connectedness.

While lacking a universal bond is often common to the human condition, the issues of kinship and union are an absolute prerequisite to the survival of inmates and success of former prisoners in the community. But we know that many lack the skills needed to define or forge positive bonds within themselves or with others. In such cases, their world view is often the polar opposite of what is traditionally defined as appropriate, healthy or receptive to pro-social conduct.

Obviously people are not inducted into a jail or prison as a reward for model mental health or social decorum. Many have serious attitude and behavioral problems that precipitated their arrests and convictions. But once in the web of "corrections," a special form of evolving alienation comes into play...an inherent, automatic distancing process that takes place between the powerful and the powerless and that leads to widely divergent values and goals.

There is a painful irony in that you as service providers are as susceptible as inmates to the impact of alienation. Why? Your function is not seen as directly supporting the primary mandate of security. In fact, you are often viewed as being at odds with "the safe and orderly operation of the facility." Thus you are too often treated as a mere appendage, not a primary function. This fact undermines your discretionary powers, budget, scheduling and political clout. All this combines to highly restrict your delivery of service---and too often leads to ending the day feeling like you've been run over by a train. This *must* have a negative effect on your overall morale and job satisfaction because the resulting stagnation and frustration are both cumulative and disheartening.

One result is a desperate gullibility on behalf of correctional service personnel as a class. Too often program providers display a vulnerability to trendy, superficial treatment approaches that have little or no relevance to core change. For example, today many are quick to embrace the simplistic notions of "criminal thinking" and "cognitive dysfunction" without reflecting on their ancient, powerful and complex causes.

I find it odd that after centuries of bemoaning the impact of criminal behavior, we as a society still only "react" to overt behavior after the fact. At the same time, offenders' internal systems of perception and response, which act to spawn and perpetuate their social deviance, remain essentially unknown and unaddressed. In the mean time, we go through our daily grind preoccupied with matters of policy, process and protocol, seldom focused on the mental and emotional gymnastics of those who function outside the circle of social acceptance. Nor do we invest the time and interest needed to grasp the powerful systematic effect of isolationism and estrangement on anti-social behavior.

So for a moment let's examine some of the forces which cause and maintain the "alien" mindset and lifestyle of persons who operate both inside and outside the limits of prevailing legal, ethical or moral standards. A useful way to approach chronic alienation is from a systems perspective. From this view, we find a highly dynamic pattern of coping responses built in diametric opposition to prevailing conditions, standards and

behaviors. The resulting "psychology of alienation" suggests that the main survival technique of disenfranchised persons is a nonconscious perversion of the prevailing interpretation of reality.

Since the early teachings of the *Upanishads*, right down through Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian traditions, we can find a common light guiding us toward the concept of unity. Toward the fact that human mental health and social harmony are best achieved in an atmosphere that fosters equality, inclusion within the commonwealth of man, and a faith in the positive potential of the life experience. "Inclusion" is a general sense of "oneness" or "connectedness" with the fate of others and the welfare of the surrounding universe.

The psycho-social state opposite to inclusion is *exclusion* or *isolation*. It results when a person lacks or loses the perception of having a vested interest in the fortunes of others or a positive linkage with the universe at large. The resulting state of separateness can be highly damaging. Since it hinders awareness of or concern for the well being of others, this sense of detachment limits a person's sense of responsibility for the impact of his or her behavior on others. It is this emotional seclusion that tends to lead to the social distance or dissonance displayed in criminal behavior.

In every case, the scope and impact of the alienation process is rooted in the degree and duration of an imbalance of power and control. In terms of contemporary criminal justice, this fact is paramount because captivity is all about the extreme use and abuse of POWER and CONTROL! Those who have it, have it all--- and those who don't are in a world of trouble. And while the free world is replete with countless such imbalances, prisons and jails are publicly sanctioned pits of pure inequality.

Generally speaking, this imbalance produces a very predictable pattern of psycho-social dissonance, fragmentation, and holistic dysfunction. Please stop and reflect. Since the dawn of time, the main reactions to subjugation have been *hostile resistance, seething rage, acute mistrust and the quest for invisibility*. Subjectively, prison is a cesspool of isolation, pain, suffering and fear where people with serious problems become three to five times worse. Objectively, jails and prisons are unnatural and counterproductive because the collective environment represents a field of energy and perspective infinitely more perverse than the pathology of any individual participant.

For hundreds of thousands of prisoners across the globe, *the main survival tools are intense suspicion, covert manipulation, disassociation and a distorted version of reality*. Again, on a superficial level, one might deduce that offender populations exhibit static, definable patterns of resistance and "criminal thinking" which differentiate them from "non-criminals." But in my opinion, **"criminality" is a highly vigorous mental perspective constantly emerging through an evolving process of personal and social alienation.**

Of the various survival techniques used by disenfranchised persons, none is more powerful or commonly used than perverting the prevailing interpretation of reality! Psycho-social aliens unconsciously distort dominant norms of perception and behavior in order to create a parallel reality or dimension that is out of synch with prevailing conditions. *Invention of a secret counter-perspective is their primary means of seeking to establish a balance of force*. This "reality bending" process gives the powerless a world of their own, thus assisting survival in what is, for them, an intensely hostile environment.

It is crucial to realize that this process takes place on a non-conscious, abstract level for all participants. None of the actors understands what is actually happening on a systems level, and thus all operate at the mercy of an ancient dynamic which has been influencing human interaction for centuries. Observed from this perspective, criminal behavior is infinitely more complex than a mere series of superficial "thinking errors" and anti-social choices! It is an intricate, interactive dance involving countless subtle adjustments which sustain an ever-shifting balance and set of boundaries between *two diametrically opposed and progressively desperate world views*.

For offenders, an obvious downside to this approach is the danger of becoming trapped in a closed loop of blind rage and resistance, isolation and despair. Psycho-social aliens do not view themselves as a part of the universal whole: quite the contrary. Instead they hold the universe to be foreign and immediately suspect, bolstering their sense of separateness with generalized skepticism and mistrust. This alienated perspective often leads to an adversarial mind set, wherein there are few if any "friends," only differing degrees of "foes." As an example, the pirates of the Caribbean once took on a negative badge of (perverted) pride and

(corrupted) honor through membership in the "Brotherhood of the Damned." Without hope of inclusion, they sought self-respect in their exclusion. ("If these bastards think I'm bad, I'll show them what BAD is!")

This process, which creates an attitude of automatic, diametrical opposition to whatever you happen to confront, can crush any hope of future good and wipe out a person's vision of purpose and quality of life. Thus it can be absolutely devastating in terms of post-release adaptation! When we release offenders whose perceptual process automatically mistrusts everyone, resists everything, distorts reality, flouts logic and can find no purpose for belonging, the results can only be dangerous for society and catastrophic for the ex-prisoners. At best, such releasees will experience extreme, long-term confusion and dissonance in trying to find a positive sense of self and role in society.

Taken to the extreme, an alien can reach a point of no return! Some outlaws get so far out there they lose track of all guideposts and drift off into an endless void of dysfunction. **Thus "alien thinking," originally adopted as a survival tool, can become a giant trap, producing styles of interpersonal and social anarchy which can explode into chaos, violence and personal destruction.**

One last tidbit of self-defined truth: one doesn't have to be a slave of the state to become trapped in the sea of alienation! It is all too easy for practitioners to become captives of their own lost faith: to experience the tragic loss of the vision of what is right and good and fine. One thing I refused to surrender as an inmate was my faith in the nature of beauty. And in preparing for this event, I realized a subtle reality about alienation. Alienation's deepest danger is the loss of faith in the underlying connection between cause and effect. Without this as a core perception, there is no hope of justice in the world. And lacking a sense of justice, there is no rationale or motive for good thoughts and good deeds, no basis for accountability to self or others.

I ask you to join me in the search for ways to reverse this downward spiral. Why? Because I believe that our first job as correctional service providers is to introduce our clients to the benefits of personal and social unity...at the same time striving to better equip them with tools useful in advancing toward this goal. Although a complex and fatiguing task, all other efforts are secondary until the impact of acute alienation is effectively covered and confronted.

Unfortunately, as in many areas of living, we understand the problem far better than the solution. But we do know that the journey out of the wasteland of isolation into the mainstream of human belonging can be keyed and sustained by a variety of thoughts, feelings and events. And *forming* a more positive alliance with life requires a conscious, willful, persistent effort that demands the vision of a better way.

But, to be blunt, the first law of service is that you cannot give what you do not have! So we must first learn and apply, then become expert at teaching, the practical reality of cause and effect as relates to the practical benefits of duty, respect, diligence, compassion and fair play. Ultimately, it will be your progress in linking with the universe that does the most to inspire others to join and participate in the quest.

As you fight to maintain a perspective dedicated to unity and growth, please keep before you the words of Chief Seattle:

*"Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect."*

I encourage you to press forward in your unique efforts to promote universal equality and synthesis of mind and spirit. **That's why we are here!**

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