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A Call for Reformation

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“A Call for Reformation”

by Chanell Burnette

Author's Introduction:

One can learn from my work the struggles that incarcerated people face. After being incarcerated for close to sixteen years, I am able to provide tremendous insight from the vantage point of a woman who is also a mother, having left behind an infant and a toddler. The educational value attached to my work is priceless, as I open my heart to my readers and bleed on paper through my pen, offering up my pain and other raw emotions.

Many people out there may watch prison television shows and get an idea of what they think prison is like. I deliver the uncut version from the depths of a hurting soul who has suffered the injustice which befalls those behind these concrete walls. When people look at a prison, they see a structural foundation which houses criminals. What they cannot see is us, the people. Real people with a desire for humane treatment. People with dreams, aspirations, goals, talents, motivation, and the hunger for more. That is what they cannot see. I take this opportunity to educate the world about real prison life.

“A Call for Reformation”

I have experienced first-hand the need for criminal justice and prison reform within the state of Virginia during the fifteen years of my incarceration. Were I to list the many complaints of offenses done to us, the number would be too great. And yet, they call us “the offenders.”

What of the offenses we suffer at the hands of this so-called justice system? Is it really justice? Or just-us? Just us against them? And I speak not presently in the terms of racial injustice or inequality, for that is another matter altogether. I am speaking of a justice system in which the primary prejudice seems to be against justice itself!

Sound the battle cry! The call for reformation has been declared! Great is the need, but few are the soldiers. Many began as strong warriors, but eventually grew weary in fighting a perpetual war of defeat. Year after year of petitioning the governor for clemency, meeting with the parole board, even seeking presidential pardons is enough to knock the fight out of anyone. I, too, have fought this fight. We are tired and we need help, people!

We need help. On a more positive note, we may finally be getting it. Many have begun to take a look at the degradation suffered by those trapped inside of America's penal system. It is a system which shows no mercy and which has no regard and no regret for lives turned upside down and families torn apart. There is no respect for individuality once a person becomes incarcerated.

We are labeled as “offenders,” “inmates,” “criminals,” “felons.” While each of these four words bears the weight of its own offensiveness, it is by far, in my opinion, the stamp of “offender” that stands out as the most repugnant. Yes, we did offend someone who was affected by our crime, but that term should also be applied to those in charge of our rehabilitation. Merriam-Webster defines the word “offender” as one that offends. The word is used much too loosely to describe one who is still human in spite of their mistakes. There is no human on earth

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who has never offended another and no human on earth who has not made a mistake. And the last time I checked, none of us can ever lose our humanness. So, technically, all of humanity are offenders. I suppose it's just that those of us locked behind bars are of the criminal kind. But there is some headway in the realization that those of us locked down are not the only offenders, the only criminals.

The ways we are being mistreated, marginalized, and abused is now gaining national attention. I cannot speak for the men on the inside, but I can speak for the women who are constantly abused—verbally, physically, mentally and emotionally. The abuse is ongoing. It has become habitual among the majority of staff. This abuse is just as damaging, if not more so, than the abuse that many of us suffered prior to our incarceration. How does one deem such a system rehabilitation?

It is not. It is destructive behavior exhibited by brutes and tyrants. By heartless, overworked and underpaid individuals whose only concerns are showing up to work and receiving a paycheck. They have no respect for those who are just as human as they are. Many fail to realize that the only differences between us and them are the uniforms and the fact that they weren't caught for their offenses. In every other aspect, we are the same. We have feelings, families, health issues, financial difficulties, and so on. We are one and the same.

So what would make one person treat another so inhumanely? Is my life not worth just as much as theirs? If they serve us food they would themselves not eat, what makes it acceptable for us to eat it? If I have a complaint of pain, why tell me that my symptoms are psychosomatic, yet send me to an outside specialist who runs a test and finds a legitimate condition? Why address me with profanity and, when I respond likewise, I am issued a disciplinary infraction? Why provide poor quality things at outrageous costs when some of us survive off our meager twenty-seven cents per hour income? On-and-on goes the list.

There is much to be said about, and definitely much to be changed within, America's penal system. What will it really take? I would like to leave you with one final thought. Delegate Rob Bell (R), in an interview that was published in *The News and Advance*, stated: “Those policies that would make our schools more dangerous or result in the early release of violent offenders are the ones that are certainly causing the most unease among those of us who have made public safety a priority in the last few years.”

I wonder if Republican Bell has any friends who are employed as correctional officers in one of these overcrowded prisons? If he did, I wonder how he would respond if his correctional officer buddy had worked his normal shift and unfortunately got drafted and was forced to work overtime. Then, what if as he was driving home late at night tired from work, he became distracted by sleepiness, took two seconds and rubbed his eyes, and in that blink of the eyes, hit and killed a pedestrian?

Would he call his buddy an “offender?” Would his buddy's accident not have offended the family of the deceased? His buddy would then become an “inmate” as well. He would become one of the people being mistreated, marginalized, and abused, sadly. Would this be enough proof that it is time for a change?