

Letter from Prison

Jane Kennedy

1971

Being a revolutionary, the threat of spending time in prison comes down on me from time to time. Not knowing much about the day-to-day life of women inside the prison walls, I have always been uneasy at the thought of that unknown world and put it out of my mind. The letter that follows was written by Jane Kennedy, an angry voice from inside the prison walls, running down the systematic pain and humiliation suffered by the women prisoners she lives with.

Jane is an inmate at Detroit House of Correction (DeHoCo), the only women's prison in Michigan. She is a political prisoner, one of five Beavers, a Catholic political organization that bombed Dow Chemical at Midland, Michigan last year. Jane was sentenced to one year and one day, but had 18 months added on when she wrote and had published an article about the Indianapolis jail, where she was serving her original term. The following letter has already cost her time in the hole at DeHoCo.

The picture Jane shows us of jail is ugly and disgusting. But what she doesn't discuss is the growing solidarity within DeHoCo, solidarity that is building in jails across the country, solidarity that she herself, as a political prisoner, is helping to mold from inside the walls.

Elizabeth Michael, a former psychologist at DeHoCo ran it down to me like this: "There is a lot less back-stabbing among the women these days, and I see two reasons for this. One is the increasing number of young women in on drug charges, who are spreading values of sharing and caring for one another. A lot of these women have a good education, are well-liked, can put into words what other women are feeling, and are genuinely interested in the other prisoners. It's contagious."

"But women in jail for political acts, like Jane Kennedy, make a difference too. Jane is strong, can't be bought off with material benefits, is not intimidated by the matrons. She is willing to spend time in the hole or have her sentence lengthened if that's what it costs her to stand up for her rights. She knows why she is in jail and knows that she is correct. Those kinds of attitudes are new in prison and they affect the way other prisoners feel about themselves, and how they act. Jane is the most respected prisoner at DeHoCo."

Jails, like the schools, are becoming breeding grounds for revolutionaries. As the economy worsens and people are becoming more politically conscious, the jails become fuller, overcrowded, as well as less able to change. Five years ago at DeHoCo women circulated a petition requesting a more varied diet, and some women even walked out of the dining hall to register their protest. They won. But like Jane tells us, women at DeHoCo today are afraid even to talk about petitions. Just like in the outside world, they know that legitimate channels for change have pretty much dried up.

"I got political by seeing how society forces you into its sick image," an ex-prisoner told me. "I escaped from DeHoCo once I was so angry. In jail it came out so clear how the people who run the prisons, and the country, were forcing me to be the way they wanted me: passive, obedient, dead."

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Prisoners learn a lot in the course of doing time. One of the first things women at the Detroit House of Correction (DeHoCo) learn is to lie to the prison officials, to become child-like in their obedience. Fear of getting more time or being thrown in the hole keeps the prisoners in line. The matrons' threats are so subtle that prisoners tend to believe that nothing is permitted.

This fear is so great that when a petition asking for more liberal visiting policies was circulated, many women agreed, but were afraid to sign. Although, by law, inmates have the right to petition for change, they knew the laws of this prison were more powerful than their constitutional rights. All the women had been to court and they knew that there was an approved side and a disapproved side, and they were not on the approved side.

Prisoners work as many as 13 hours a day at prison jobs that pay 25 cents a day. This money is all they have to buy cigarettes, make-up, extra food, pen and pencil, radio batteries, and other personal needs, all which must be bought at the prison-run commissary. The commissary, along with the beauty shop and the laundry, are three profit-producing areas of the prison. Since the commissary is the only place where women can spend money, they can get away with charging \$1.25 for a jar of Maxwell House Coffee that costs 90 cents in the "free world."

While the commissary and the beauty shop make their profit from the prisoners as purchasers, the laundry makes a profit from the prisoners as workers. Thousands of dirty diapers coming from the Plymouth State Home are washed and processed daily, along with linens for the prison, for Herman Kiefer Hospital, and for Receiving Hospital. Daily the women sort, lift and pack heavy bags and bundles of linens and uniforms. Women are frequently burned by the hot steam and boiling water.

Prison is particularly hard on women because it breaks up their family, separating them from their growing children. But it does more than destroy their motherhood. Most of the women are of childbearing age, and a good number are pregnant and have their babies while in prison.

When Barbara arrived at DeHoCo she was 2 and one-half months pregnant. Even though she went to the prison clinic every Tuesday to have her urine and blood pressure checked, no one ever asked any questions or encouraged her to volunteer information about herself. So while she had RH Negative blood, no one at the clinic knew about it. She worked on the cleaning detail—scrubbing floors, lifting trash cans, washing walls—until she delivered. When she was 8 months pregnant she asked the nurse to allow her to change her work to occupational therapy (handicrafts), but the nurse said that she would be better off working for the entire nine months and refused to OK a job transfer.

In her fourth month she had a kidney problem and her pain was so great that she was sent to an outside hospital. She spent 3 days there, and passed a kidney stone. She returned to prison with two prescriptions from the "free world" doctor, but she didn't receive one of them because the prison clinic personnel did not believe she needed it.

After delivery of the baby at an outside hospital, she returned to the prison and one month later was given a job in the cannery, lifting dishpans full of tomatoes from the steam belt and carrying them ten feet to the conveyor belt. Later she lifted 100 pound bags of sugar from the floor to a cart, wheeled them to another side of the building and poured the sugar into large buckets, lifted the buckets from the floor to a platform higher than the top of her head.

As a prisoner I often wonder what would happen if prison authorities did not have the present form of punishment (or is it torture?) available to them. One girl was sent from the prison hospital to isolation, where she grows weaker every day, because she broke a window by her hospital bed. After being ignored by all the hospital personnel when she continually insisted that she was being given the wrong medicine, she was forced to make her complaint heard by smashing the glass. They were giving her the wrong medicine, but the price she had to pay for being right was banishment or isolation.

Reasons for being sent to isolation are often petty and ridiculous. Sandy, for instance, spent five days in the hole for making a cup-cake-sized pie while working in the kitchen. Alice spent the same amount of time in isolation for answering a matron with an angry inflection in her voice.

The most extreme punishment is the Dungeon, a very small concrete cell in the basement of the Administration Building. Prisoners are often denied mattresses, blankets and clothing while in the dungeon.

There was a 17-year-old girl named Silve, who refused to mop the floor. She was locked in isolation where she kicked and screamed so hard that she knocked the window out of its setting in the door. When the matron called the guards, she struggled and kicked in desperation, so that the guards used their fists on her face and body in order to drag her to the dungeon. The first week we could hear Silve's screams. Then she began to sing. We don't hear her anymore.

As I write, Theresa, a strong, middle-aged prisoner, is being escorted to isolation. Her crime was being confused about how to hem a dress a matron had given her to do. The dress had two marks showing where to make the hem, so when Theresa put the dress aside to ask the matron about it, she was accused of making the second mark herself and sent to the hole.

Finally, there is Louise, who came to DeHoCo after several stays in a mental institution. One day she "appeared to be going off," When this was reported, prison officials told the matron to put Louise in Triple o (maximum isolation). When she refused to go, they locked Louise in her room where she spent 3 weeks. At first she cried, but later no one even knew that she was there.

What is the purpose of this kind of administrative treatment of human beings? How will society ever make restitution to these mistreated people? When will society demand an end to 18th century institutions in the midst of the 20th? When will the common people know their complicity in the inhuman treatment of the prisoners of their day?

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