

What it Means to be a Prison Abolitionist

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I started this work a few years ago when I became fascinated by what prisons were like in other countries and what prisoners in Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and China had to endure. Then I became more involved in the local anarchist scene and was turned on to Independent Media and the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC). The original purpose of the ABC was to support the anarchists who were put in prison during the Russian Revolution.

A group of people on the outside organized themselves and delivered much needed support and help to their comrades on the inside. The ABC still has that mission, however, in the US, it has grown to encompass all prisoners who have the intentions of making their lives right and lifting themselves up to a higher plane of existence.

I soon learned about Stanley Tookie Williams and Mumia Abu Jamal: two very high profile death row inmates who had a positive influence on society, but were trapped in the system with no way to get out, despite each man's mighty support from people all over the world. I found out about an open listserv called "ABC Friends" which is an international email group that is focused on anarchist prisoners and prison issues in general. Through these many emails, I was quickly brought into a deeper awareness of the level of injustice going on within the so-called justice system.

When I moved to Cleveland, the anarchists here were starting an ABC and I jumped right in. Once Cleveland ABC's address was published in the bi-monthly ABC Network newsletter, we began receiving mail from prisoners, mostly requests for literature. I was responsible for writing the letters and sending out literature, which to me, was the most interesting aspect of the network. I also became a part of the Cleveland Independent Media Center and co-hosted a weekly radio show. Using the internet and the contacts I was developing, I learned about all kinds of political prisoners and the way the system works. On the radio show, I ran a regular prison section with current prison news, talked about what was going on with the prisoners I was in contact with, and usually had a profile about a political prisoner.

My goal for doing prisoner solidarity work is to break down the walls of separation between those of us on the outside and those of us on the inside. The most important aspect of my work is building relationships and helping out people as much as I can. Many of the prisoners I have come across have become anarchists while in prison and it has been a true joy to work with them. From the get-go, I wanted to reach out past the walls, past the concrete, past the steel, past the laws of the State, and bring a little piece of life from the outside to those who are hungry for the humanity that is in them.

The relationships I have developed with prisoners over the years have become very precious to me. I have also come to realize how important those relationships are to those who I have formed them with. Those of us who reach out to those in prison are like a lifeline. We are the most valuable thing they possess. Relationships with prisoners are not the easiest to establish and maintain because both parties are coming from such different environments and the needs of prisoners are acute. I have had to assert myself in a number of instances to let the other person know where I was coming from and what my limits were.

It takes time to get something established and to get on the same page. It takes patience and continual communication but once the swing gets in motion, then things can start to happen. Each prisoner is different as far as

their needs and our relationship. Some of them, I consider comrades and we collaborate on projects; some I keep in regular communication with like a pen pal. Whatever the case, it's a small thing on my part, but a huge thing to the one on the other side. By bridging the gap, by reaching out, by making the gulf between those on the inside and those on the outside a little smaller, it's my way of abolishing one of the prison system's most powerful weapons: the wall of separation.

It is not easy for the human spirit to rise above its situation if it feels like the world is against them. This is exactly how the prison system is set up today. Prisoners, regardless of what they have done or the circumstances surrounding their case, are dehumanized and castrated. They go out of sight, out of mind.

“...though they shouldn't forget about me because they are spending an average of \$30,000 a year on me. For that kind of money, I should be getting the kind of treatment I deserve, but I'm not. I'm forgotten, neglected silenced. I don't matter... For we are at the mercy of the state. We are their property, we are their slaves. Rarely will you find a slave owner who cares about his property. Usually the wardens are just actors, and their cast of characters follow their script. It's just like a nursing home. They get all the money and leave the human to rot. Will I get out of here? I don't know. Will I survive this hell? I don't know. Suicide is a viable option some days, but other days I want to live, regardless of my circumstances. There is a glimmer of hope out there, somewhere. It's dim most of the time, but I know it's there. And it's enough to keep me going even though the world is against me...”

People on the outside have the power to reach through the cold bars of steel and touch a human heart that lies trapped behind those bars-the heart that can soar above its circumstances if given a window. I want to bring out the human behind the iron armor. That's what we can do through our communication and assistance to those who are truly seeking help and want to survive, to do better, to live. We can bring them a petal of freedom, a petal they will save and cherish and eventually, if we keep up the work, they will make a beautiful flower with. Yes, flowers can grow in the cold stone. I've seen it happen.



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