

## Alienation & The Prison World

In his book, *Evil: The Shadow Side of Reality*, John Sanford describes the prison world as being the exact opposite of the outside world. In our general society we are taught when we are young that we should be good, honest, caring, loving, trustworthy, kind and thoughtful, along with many other positive characteristics. In prison, he points out, the opposite is true. You quickly learn not to trust anybody; kindness is seen as weakness or an attempt to manipulate others and anger can be a protection device. The "con" is the person who is able to get what he/she wants and is often seen as someone to emulate.

One day my clerk Napoleon expressed some concern about an ethics course I was teaching in my early years at Green Haven Prison. He warned me that an inmate can't afford to be moral or ethical. In fact, he said, "In a place like this it can get you killed." Napoleon was an intelligent and insightful observer of the prison world and I often thought of his comment over the years.

I always taught Ethics as response-ability, i.e., the ability to respond to difficult challenges in the arena of humankind. Our ethics should give us the ability to think through life situations with insight and integrity. How this applies to the prison world in a way that a person can live with integrity and have the ability to respond remains a difficult task.

One day I came face to face with the point Sanford was trying to make. An inmate came to my office with a Philadelphia newspaper containing an article about a young boy named Donnie McNair who needed a kidney transplant. The newspaper was sponsoring a national campaign to raise \$100,000 to pay for the transplant. The inmate was suggesting that we try to raise some money at Green Haven. The plans were set and on a Sunday afternoon in the prison auditorium we held a program that somewhat resembled a telethon. We had a band on stage with performers and an MC. About 600 inmates came for the program and each was given a disbursement form which, when filled out, would allow a designated amount to be withdrawn from the inmate's account. A large blackboard was on stage to record the pledges and at the end of the program over \$1,600 had been raised. A week later we found that only two of the

disbursement forms bounced – which was considered unusual in prison. About three weeks later, on a Sunday evening, the editor of the Philadelphia newspaper called me to thank the men of Green Haven, and added: "Their donation was the largest they had received in the whole country."

Sanford was right: the shadow side in prison contains those qualities that get repressed, i.e., love and concern for others and a willingness to respond to suffering in the human community. The state of alienation that exists in the prison world makes it very difficult to stay in touch and nurture these qualities. And the question needs to be asked: Does this create problems for a person when released?