**Rev Muller had selected several study papers from this article. We have chosen to present the article in its entirety, rather than excerpts as individual study papers.**

# A View From Inside

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I have been incarcerated for eleven years. During my confinement I have read hundreds of books and articles about the increase in the prison population, the high percentage of black inmates, the problem of suicide among pre-trial inmates, the murder of inmates by guards or other prisoners, the death of inmates due to fire, the use of inmates as "guinea pigs" by business and government agencies, poor conditions in prisons, beatings, starvation, needless harassment, intimidation, archaic therapeutic programs, obsolete vocational training, inferior schools, racist prison guards:, and the unfair treatment of our families. Organizations and committees continue to monitor and report the injustices of our penal system. Yet, as a prison inmate, nothing has changed in my environment from the time when I was first arrested, taken to the pre-trial detention center on Rikers Island and put in a cell without a mattress.

It is unrealistic to think that anything in the correctional system will change. More money will be used to build "modern" prisons. New therapeutic programs will be implemented. Some guards will be dismissed for wrong-doing, but nothing will change. Poor people and people of color will still populate the prisons as victims of our society. Some white people will still control the institutions and well-meaning people will still document the abuses of the system without ever coming to grips with the reality of the situation: that the correctional system punishes rather than corrects. The structure of corrections encourages and promotes distrust between employees

and inmates, as well as alienates inmate from inmate, thereby obstructing all communication and growth. Even these words have been repeated thousands of times in the past. Almost anyone will admit that our prisons are human warehouses and that rehabilitation does not work. What society needs is an answer rather than another description of the problem. Many groups have proposed answers to the prison problem. Politicians argue for longer sentences. Judges and lawyers ask for a more effective judicial system. Task forces created by the governor blame overcrowding of prisons for recidivism. Church groups and other humane organizations propose educational and vocational training programs. What all these groups have in common is that their solutions come from textbooks, and that their experiences are remote from the experiences of the people they are trying to help. Thus their solutions, when implemented, are alien and ineffective; they do not deal with the root of the problem. My answers differ from those of these groups, because I know both punishment and rehabilitation from the inside point of view. My solutions to the problem of prison have evolved out of my experiences as a prisoner. Since the solutions I propose arise out of the context of my experiences, it is necessary for me to relate some of those experiences. And in order to understand my prison experiences, you must know who I was before I was incarcerated. For the pattern of victimization that shaped the course of my life and my struggles began long before I entered prison.

One day when I was in the fifth grade I got into an argument with my teacher. She wanted me to put my cap in the coat closet but I refused. My father had whipped me for having my new leather jacket stolen weeks earlier. I tried to explain this to the teacher, bur she would not listen. She wanted me to bow to her authority and I refused. This angered her and she tried to take the cap from me. We struggled over it there in the classroom, but she was unable to take it

away. When she reported the incident to the principal, I was labeled an aggressive child and put into special classes for children who had learning disabilities and physical handicaps from the sixth grade on. Outside of the classroom, those special classes were what we children called "dummy classes.” In the special classes I soon learned that I was one of the smarter students, even though my reading level was actually two years behind my grade. I was able to complete the homework in class without ever having to study at home. I was at the top of my class. I received good marks on my report card, even though I lagged behind the regular classes because the school had already determined what I could and could not accomplish. My work was never evaluated in relation to the standards set for students in my grade, but in relation to what my class was expected to achieve. Thus the school limited my growth, because I could not break out of the predetermined structure of their system. I could never be more than the smartest dummy of the class. Outside of the classroom my status in school was reinforced by friends and family.

"What size shoes you wear?" George said to me during lunch in the schoolyard. "I bet they're a size eleven or twelve. You're a dub."

"I ain't no dub."

"Yes you are. Look how big you are and you're in the stupid class. You big dub," George repeated loudly to the laughter of the students around us.

Finding no challenge in school work and unable to compete against the stereotypes of the teachers and students, I grew discontented with school. Up until this time, I went to school because it was what Mama wanted, but when I began to think for myself the purpose of school lost its value in my life. School had not taught me any skills that helped me to cope in the community and at home. It did not offer me any insights into what I experienced daily in the

streets. There was no connection between school and a meaningful, financially rewarding job. White people owned all the businesses in my neighborhood and black people worked for them. I was in a class of slow learners. I was destined to work in a factory all my life, unless I could somehow earn enough money to buy a business. These were the problems, questions and thoughts that I wrestled with, problems and questions the teachers did not raise or talk about in school. Questions and thoughts that eventually led me, for lack of an alternative, into the streets for answers.

I was forced into the streets because the conditions of my environment taught me different priorities than those I was learning in school. People in my community were concerned about pressing financial problems, rather than higher education. My parents, aunts, uncles and other adults I knew had little education and worked at unskilled jobs. How could I become more than they were? I was labeled a failure in school. I had already perceived that as a young black boy I was unwanted in the larger society. Without looking back, I turned to the streets because it was there that I received support. Other youths with similar experiences interacted with me, and we supported each other in what we perceived to be a hostile society, Crime was an inevitable part of street life because there was no way for poor, ill-educated youths to earn money within the law. There were not enough unskilled jobs to go around, and our families did not have the resources to offer us alternatives. This is reflected in the high rate of unemployment among black youths, traditionally the highest unemployed group in this country.

I was eighteen years old when I committed a robbery with two older men. During the course of the robbery, a man was killed. Three days after the robbery I was arrested and taken to the Adolescent House of Detention on Rikers Island at about one o'clock in the morning. I was

locked in a bullpen with several other youths. After an hour, we were taken from the bullpen one at a time and told to take off our clothes for a body search, which included an anal inspection.

The next day we were told to pack our belongings for assignment to a permanent housing unit. Walking through the hallways with the rest of the group I looked around, both curious and apprehensive. The other youths in the hallways knew we were new on Rikers Island. We had an air about us that I would later be able to recognize in others. Some of the youths standing in the hallway started to call us "new-jacks" and to talk among themselves about us as sexual objects. The bolder youths offered to give us protection cigarettes and cookies. All of them assaulted us with cat-calls. I remember being afraid and unable to turn my head. I did not want to know whether they were talking to me. When we arrived at our new housing unit, our guard called my name and gave me a card to hand to the guard in charge. On it was my name and commitment number. In addition, someone had written in bold letters: Killer.

A few months later, a guard on Rikers Island attacked me for disobeying a minor direct order. I gave a cigarette to another youth who was confined in his cell. When the other youths saw the guard threaten me and then attack me in the hall of our housing unit, they started banging on the doors of the dayroom where they were restricted and screaming to support me.
They knew that I was only trying to help the youth in his cell and that I was being attacked without cause. In response, the guard left me temporarily while he called for extra guards to restore order. When the guards arrived they gave me and several others who had complained about the injustice a brutal beating. After taking us to the hospital for treatment, we were escorted to a room in the administrative part of the jail. There the deputy superintendent called the other two youths who were with me out into the hall, one at a time. He told them that I was a

bad character and a troublemaker. When they tried to tell him what had happened, he said that they should not try to protect me. He was not interested in knowing the truth. (This is a classic example of how I learned to think of myself in negative images. I was doing a good deed and got beaten for it.)

When my mother came to visit me, the deputy superintendent told her that I was starting trouble in jail. She was upset by her conversation with him. She pleaded with me not to cause any more trouble. She cried, seeing me through the glass that separated us, my face broken and my speech impaired by swollen lips and missing teeth. When I tried to tell her what happened, she wasn't interested in the truth either. She felt threatened by the situation and feared for my life.

I felt angry about being beaten, victimized and blamed for a situation that I did not create. Even though she acted out of fear for me, I felt anger that my mother did not support me and instead pleaded with me to forget the incident In the next few weeks I contacted several lawyers in the hope of having the guards prosecuted. Two women lawyers from a public interest firm visited me in jail and listened to my story. They believed me and the other youths who were beaten. In time, the two lawyers and I became friends. (They filed a class action suit against the City of New York in response to our stories. Several years later, we won the suit in federal court.)

My relationship with the lawyers became important. They were the first people whom I recognized as authority figures who accepted me as a person, rather than a "dummy," killer and troublemaker. They were the first people who worked in the system who validated my experiences and affirmed my views and insights. They created a network in my life that helped me cope with the pressures and contradictions of prison. Over the years, my relationship with

them and with other significant people in my life empowered me. They gave me the ability to see beyond the context of my past and the many experiences that had invalidated me. This helped me to reject my acceptance and internalization of the stigmas of a system that had rendered me a victim from elementary school to my incarceration. Once I rejected the stigmas, I was able to see myself as a person. No longer a victim, I learned to hold myself accountable in my relationships. And accountability taught me responsibility. I began to see myself as someone who had equal power in relationships and who therefore had to be accountable to others for my actions.

Reflecting on my own experiences, I understand that many men and women in prison were victims of the system long before their incarceration. They were the dropouts, the "slow-learners" and the youths who turned to drugs, unable to cope with the contradictions of society. Many prisoners are uneducated and unskilled because they are victims of the institutions that labeled them. They learned powerlessness and irresponsibility. The cause of their imprisonment is not simply lack of education, or dependence on drugs; it is more fundamental in nature. Their crimes were committed because they were powerless to act in any other way. They had no choices, because they could not see beyond the context of experiences which prepared them to be criminals by defining them as young hoodlums and good-for-nothings. As I became empowered as a person, I could look back and see the importance of my history as a poor black youth in the development of my sense of self. I began to see my history as a source of direction for prisoners struggling for political power and to be understood by the outside community. Empowerment is the ability to see beyond the limiting labels of our institutions that stereotype certain groups in our society. It is the power to change the environment by seeing the truth of our experiences, which leads to self-affirmation. I can now look back at my experiences and see that I was never a

bad boy, a dummy, or a troublemaker, but 1 had internalized stigmas that were placed upon me by the institutions that had power over me.

The correctional system is a reflection of the other institutions that molded me into a victim. Its ideology of control keeps prisoners disempowered in a number of ways. First, it promotes the belief that prisoners need to be controlled for society's protection, which in turn serves to justify the rising cost of corrections. The control ideology fosters powerlessness and ignorance by setting the community against prisoners and by fostering a view of prisoners as animals who belong in cages. Thus, prisoners and the community are effectively kept from forming alliances that would promote prison reform.

This ideology keeps prisoners powerless by making us believe that the prison administration has our best interests at heart. Without questioning whether or not we need to be controlled, we are led to believe that this control is something we must maintain for our own safety against each other. This dependence results in a situation where prisoners are afraid to question the ideology of corrections for fear of losing their protection and because questioning the system means risking attack from the system. The kind of control that renders prisoners powerless tells them that they need to be controlled; it reinforces their victimization. It says that they are hoodlums, criminals and animals, forever unfit for communication with other human beings. It denies the reality of violence in corrections, declaring that we are safe even when we have been victims of abuse and beatings in prison. Thus prisoners remain separate and disempowered, often denying their own reality. This vicious cycle prevents them from effecting serious fundamental change in themselves or their environment. Most of them are destined, once they hit the streets again, to begin yet another round of crime and incarceration.

The solution to the problem of crime is inherent in solving the problems of individuals who are victims of society's institutions. Their problems stem from their negative experiences as powerless people in society's institutions. Because of the function of corrections' ideology of control, it is impossible for corrections employees to operate as a support group for prisoners in the system. They cannot empower prisoners, validate their experiences or help them to develop responsibility and accountability. The employees are part of the system, and at odds with prisoners because of their positions and power over us. They cannot help prisoners develop responsibility and accountability because the institution alienates and discourages relationships between employees and prisoners.

The solution to decreasing crime lies in teaching individuals responsibility, accountability and empowerment. These attributes can only be developed by changing the ideology of the system and fostering human connections between the outside community (as my lawyers were for me) and prisoners. The solution to solving the problem of crime and creating a successful rehabilitation program in prison is to help incarcerated people develop positive self-images and to empower them to cope with the stigmas and contradictions of society. Based on my own experiences, I think this can only be done by developing adequate support groups for prisoners, groups who will validate prisoners experiences and develop real relationships of mutual trust. Within these relationships, men and women will grow through learning accountability and responsibility. Such support groups will give them the necessary foundation to question their past behavior and reflect upon their experiences. It will empower them by helping prisoners to see beyond the context of their experiences.

It is unrealistic to think that anyone will solve prisoners' problems except themselves. If prisons are going to rehabilitate, prisoners will have to rehabilitate other prisoners, and the community will have to become more involved in the prison system to bring about the necessary changes to enhance individual growth. Otherwise, nothing will change in corrections. New programs will be implemented. Other prisons will be built, but nothing will change. Prisoners will still be victims of our institutions, powerless, and without the ability to interpret their experiences. They will continue to see no choices for themselves because we have prepared them to commit crimes.