



Qualities of a Prisoner Ally

There are many ways of “helping” prisoners. One is to impose what you think is “best” for them. This is the typical approach to well-meaning “experts” and “professionals” who are members of the criminal (in)justice bureaucracies. Another way of “helping” prisoners is through charity. We use charity in prison to provide relief of suffering and to express compassion. But there are problems with charity: charity creates dependency. It communicates pity rather than shared outrage and can romanticize the prisoner. Charity sometimes relieves the sufferings of prisoners, but it does not alter the basic conditions responsible for the sufferings. A third way of helping prisoners is to become their ally.

These are some of the qualities of a prisoner ally as compared to those of the “charitable” person:

- The charitable person does not think of altering the prisoner’s persistent need for help. The prisoner must always depend on the good will of the charitable.
- The prisoner ally helps the oppressed prisoner become empowered to change his/her situation.

- The charitable person often acts out of guilt and pities the prisoner who is seen as a “poor soul”.
- The prisoner ally treats the prisoner as an ally in change, sharing anger about prison oppression.
- The charitable person might think the prisoner’s situation comes from some fault within the prisoner.
- The prisoner ally identifies social and cultural forces that contribute to the cause of prisoners’ oppression.
- The charitable person often has a plan for the prisoner, who is not regarded as a peer.
- The prisoner ally and the prisoner strategize together, mutually; no one must be thanked
- The charitable person expects the prisoner alone to change.
- The prisoner ally works with the prisoner and takes mutual risks, experiencing change also.
- The charitable person has his/her own view of what the prisoner must feel.
- The prisoner ally understands the prisoner’s experiences through the prisoner’s own words.
- The charitable person has easy access to the criminal (in)justice bureaucracies.
- The prisoner ally often has a stormy relationship with the bureaucracies, because s/he is perceived as threatening to persons who hold power in the system.

(from *Instead of prisons*)

Note: Obviously, we are not proposing that the ally and charitable person are always so very opposite or that people ever actually fulfill either role in exactly the manner presented here. Rather, our purpose is simply to contrast the basic qualities of these two relationships. Learning how to become an ally is an abolitionist task.



Q&A: Why Should Prisoners Be Respected If They Have Broken The Law?

Because not every prisoner is actually guilty, if the truth were known.

Because “It is the duty of the institutional head to take all reasonable steps to ensure the safe custody of inmates committed to his/ her care.” (Penitentiary Act: 1962-302,Part 2,Section 2.27).

Because any threat to the safety of any prisoner is a violation of human rights, and if allowed to go unchallenged, constitutes a threat to each of us.

Q&A: Hasn't Society A Right To Be Protected From Law Breakers?

Yes, of course. But, does throwing them into prison really protect anyone? Or, does it in reality pave the way for more violence by more people who have been incarcerated under degrading conditions, and then returned to society more unstable than when they went in.

And, anyway, we should also be dealing with those corporate law-breakers who poison our food, rivers and air, and who violate health and safety regulations, all of which cause far more extensive injury and death than does street crime.

Q&A: What Alternatives Are There To Imprisonment?

Decarceration, i.e. phasing out the vast majority who do not require institutionalization. Although 85% is the generally accepted estimate, the Commissioner of Penitentiaries admitted that 40% don't need to be in prison. That would mean 40% of 11,500 (Federal prison population alone). This would mean 4,600 prisoners who should have been phased out by now.

Obviously this is not being done, and contributes to riots and disturbances. This happens mainly when too many people are in prison for too long.

What is August 10-National Prison Justice Day?

A day set aside each year since 1976 when prisoners and supporters gather to respect the memory of those who have died unnatural deaths in Canadian Prisons.

Q&A: What Concrete Changes Are Needed To Stop Prison Violence?

Concerned citizens to monitor every institution regularly and speak privately with staff and prisoners about their problems, and to publicize their findings.

Parole boards should automatically grant paroles to all those who have completed their minimum sentence. All those not dangerous to themselves or others to have their sentence commuted to make them eligible for immediate parole.

Administrators to meet regularly with Prisoners' Committees to deal with their problems.

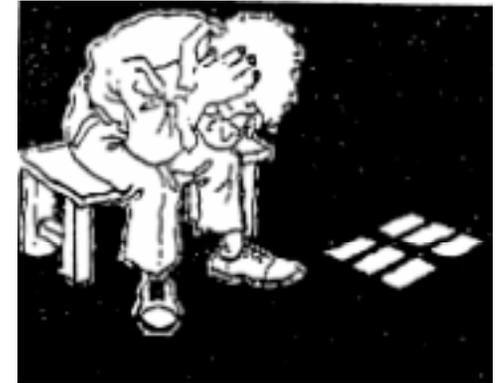
Legislatures to revise sentencing laws downwards to short flat sentences, with maximum of five years.

The National Parole Board to be abolished and its resources transferred to meet the community's needs.

Q&A reprinted from Still Barred from Prison Claire Culhane

**ABOLISH SOLITARY CONFINEMENT NOW
END FORCED INVOLUNTARY TRANSFERS
END MANDATORY SUPERVISION PAROLE
DECLARE A MORATORIUM ON ALL
PRISON CONSTRUCTION AND EXPANSION.
MAKE THE PRISON SYSTEM OPEN AND
ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PUBLIC
END INDISCRIMINATE SHOOTING AT
PRISONERS BY RIOT SQUADS, POLICE
AND MILITARY.**

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Q & A

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Q&A: Why Do We Have Such A Large Prison Population?

Canada shares the record for the longest sentences--often from 10-25 years before parole ELIGIBILITY (which in turn can and does mean a full life span).

The longer prisoners are kept isolated from their families and community the more difficult it is for them to readjust on release, and the more likely that they will be returned to prison. This pattern does not diminish the so-called crime rate.

Canada is undergoing severe economic crises in unemployment and inflation, resulting in cutbacks in housing, health care and social services. However, prisons are a multibillion dollar industry which employ tens of thousands of people and are seen as a boost to the economy. We are therefore encouraging an industry whose merchandise is prisoners.