A WORLD WITHOUT WHY

by

William C. Crabbe
I had thought when I traded my life as a dedicated suburbanite for a life in the country I had experienced about as radical a transition as I would ever face. I even wrote a book about it, since that’s how I deal with the things that challenge me in life. But nothing in my fairly long and bizarre existence had ever prepared me for going to prison. When you are living through your childhood and adolescence you might imagine yourself becoming a fireman or a policeman – not too many people think “I’d like to end up in federal prison.” It is a sufficiently uncommon goal that it is not usually included as an option in the vocational preference testing that many of us undergo. Even if we have family role models with that proclivity, it is still not something that is presented as a family-sanctioned personal goal. Certainly, it never occurred to me even as an option. So imagine my surprise to find myself
suddenly being viewed as such a threat to society that I needed incarceration. But it happened and the residue will always be with me, so I’m trying to make the best of it.

This book is set up to be a series of vignettes, taken from a humorous perspective. It is my therapy, if you would, my effort to survive a situation that is still incomprehensible to me in my darker moments. Because of that, I felt it important to explain that my humor is a defense. It is not meant to suggest that there is anything actually humorous about the experience itself. Nor is it meant to denigrate or demean those who are serving terms, some of them ridiculously lengthy by anyone’s standards. I have also made every effort not to divulge anything that could get anyone in trouble. The events and practices described here are all well known to those who administer prison camps. If any camp inmates who might read this think differently, think again.

And as you read this it is good to realize that the prison camp is the lowest security setting in the federal system. There are also low, medium, maximum, and super-max facilities, which inmates lump together as being “behind the fence.” By all reports life behind the fence is very different, and is often a much more degrading and potentially more dangerous experience.

Contrary to public perception, many inmates in the prison camp in which I resided will openly admit that they committed a
crime. While their version of events often doesn’t match that of the prosecution, and they often express much more complicated motivations, they make no bones about saying that they did something both illegal and wrong. This does not make them ipso facto bad people, a distinction that appears to have gotten lost in our current zeal to incarcerate. It really is possible to love your wife, family, and children, lead a good life free of legal entanglements, and still end up making a poor decision at some point that leads to intentionally breaking the law. Yet for every one of those I encountered, there were about two others who told a different story, one where they certainly didn’t intentionally commit a crime, and the government engaged in all manner of bribery and deceit in order to obtain either a deal or a conviction. Unfortunately, since this matches much of my own experience, I no longer discount these stories. I believe our federal judicial system is so seriously out of whack that it threw the concept of justice under the bus a long time ago. So the last thing I want to do is to make fun of its victims. I have met many very fine people while incarcerated. And I’ve found that those who survive best do so by seeing the fundamental silliness of much of what surrounds them. It is with that in mind that I wrote the following. Since our current legal system makes it extremely difficult to know who actually should and should be there, I dedicate it to the nearly 1% of
Americans who are currently incarcerated and the 2.5% who are currently under some form of legal supervision. For those doing the math, that’s pushing 10,000,000 people and reflects a rate, I might add, that far exceeds that of any other developed nation on the planet.

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PROLOGUE

We had now been locked down for a week or so. There was a big avian flu scare going around and when a couple of inmates started to display symptoms of possible respiratory distress they were swept up and put in the “hole,” a place that was part
of one of the adjacent higher-security facilities and was usually used for discipline. The “hole” was the primary threat used by the correctional officers (or COs as we less-than-affectionately called them) and was most like a holding cell in a local jail. While there an inmate was as close to being in solitary confinement as one found in our setting, often for months at a time while some presumed transgression was investigated. Since they often put several people in there while they sorted things out, there were many times when someone spent months in the hole having done nothing at all, like the time they threw an entire work shift in the hole when some piece of property got damaged and no one immediately confessed. At times of medical crises like this flu scare it worked pretty well as a nominal leper colony. The rest of us were confined to our living units and told that any effort to leave would represent a risk to national security and be treated accordingly. This was during a time when discussions about waterboarding were in the national news so we tended to pay attention, not that we were inclined to leave anyway or we would have simply taken advantage of the fact that there was no fence around the camp. In a very real sense, we were always there because we agreed to stick around.

As the momentum around this uncertain epidemic built, the COs suspended the chow hall operations and brought us meals in
huge metal carts, and some even wore masks while doing so. Of course these same COs were observed going maskless out to their cars at the end of the day so they could drive home, I guess in the interest of either importing or exporting a more interesting variant of the disease that might ultimately justify the intervention. Other than initially making sure we didn’t get any fresh air, they did offer some other tips about how to control the spread of the virus. We were told to wash frequently with soap and hot water, although as luck would have it our hot water system wasn’t working at the time. We were instructed to make sure we reported for flu shots, except they didn’t have any of the correct vaccine. The importance of getting proper sleep was emphasized, while they kept waking us up every few hours to count us. Exercise was critical, we were told, as they locked us up in our residences. And we were told to keep a three-foot distance between us and the next inmate. That one gave me serious pause.

There were three hundred and fifty of us in this living unit, which included several relatively small common areas. While being told this we were all crammed into an entryway that was about twenty feet square. Had we all immediately decided to embrace the “three-foot” personal space rule, many would have been hurt as they were hurled outward by the rapid inflation of our immediate universe. In addition, as our primary residence
my bunkie and I were sharing an eight-by-ten-foot cubicle with six-foot cement walls. It had a common ceiling that was about nine feet up there, and no door, and was one of maybe twenty such cubicles on each arm of the particular wing in which I was housed. While only two of us were sharing this space, some of these same cubicles had as many as four inmates living in them. My background is clinical psychology and my bunkie’s was real estate investment. Neither of us were engineers but we both had acquired a basic grip of geometry along our educational paths. In an attempt to follow the three-foot rule I tried to conceptualize each of us as being inside of three-foot spheres that were allowed to bounce off each other but never intersect. The only way I could make it work in my head so that we could move around at all was if we took turns taking perfectly timed jumps so that we were only on the same horizontal plane while seated at opposite ends of the cube. The image that stuck with me was of guys jumping up and down throughout the cubes of our range as they all tried to maintain the medically prescribed safe distance. This was at a time when I still listened to what I was told and tried to comply, before I realized much of what was said to me was intended to be ignored and was only being communicated so that someone could later check a box on a form.

We were told by the COs that our state of lockdown was to continue until there had been three consecutive days without
anyone showing signs of symptoms. The fact that this was creating a strong motive to underreport seemed to escape their consideration. Despite serious peer pressure to man up so we could get back outside, a few guys still stepped forward sniffing loudly, perhaps hoping there was hot water in the hole and thus resetting the lockdown clock for the rest of us.

Then in the middle of all this one of the original vector cases was returned. It appears that he never really had the flu but had been trying to tell them he was experiencing an uptick in his asthma and couldn’t seem to get the proper medications at what was both euphemistically and somewhat mysteriously called the Camp Clinic. After he had presented to the clinic for several straight days complaining of being unable to breathe, they finally paid attention to him, heard him wheeze, immediately panicked and put him in the hole. Once there, he was promptly forgotten about. He was unsuccessful in his escalating efforts to get the attention of any of the COs in that setting until the physician who was visiting there, trying to find some cases to check on, heard him pounding on a door.

Said the Doc, after letting himself in the room, “Are you sick?”

Said the inmate, “I’m fine; I never was sick.” There was a pause, then the inmate decided he better seize the opportunity,
“You wouldn’t happen to have an Alupent inhaler on you, would you?”

The doc checked and, indeed, other than the slight wheezing of the chronically asthmatic the inmate was symptomless, so he was returned to be with the rest of us, where he was watched carefully by his friends lest an errant wheeze get him thrown back in the hole. The doc then went in quest of someone else to diagnose and treat. It was rapidly becoming unclear to everyone whether there were actually any cases at all in this alleged epidemic.

After about a week they decided that maybe some fresh air was in order and let us all out to walk around the track for a while en masse. This must have looked to any knowledgeable outside observer as a high plains, forensic version of the teeming march around the large stone structure known as the Kaaba that occurs during the Islamic Hajj. After about twenty minutes, and presumably cleansed, we were returned to lockdown. At this point a pool was started on how many days it would take them to admit that the whole thing was pretty much a farce and end the lockdown. Before the betting line was shut off it was at eight days, with some of the COs taking as high as ten. But, then, the COs had insider trading knowledge, not that they were doing time for it alongside the so-accused investment counselors in the camp.
I found myself wondering, “How on earth had I ended up in this absolutely insane environment, a place where logic seemed to travel a mobius strip and one assumed either Alice or the White Rabbit was lurking just around the corner?” On its good days this was a place where low-grade debasement was the administrative method of choice and the only truly disallowed obscenity by either prisoner or guard was the word “why.” How, indeed? Well, there was this business partner, and it seems he was allergic to payroll taxes, and . . . .
Like most people, I once assumed that prisons were filled with criminals. It seemed a logical assumption. You commit a crime, get caught, and go to prison. It’s Socialization 1A in American schools. And as you get older you typically learn a few more ins and outs about how our judicial system works, typically described in positive, almost glowing, terms. Sure, you think that occasionally it all goes haywire and someone ends up spending some time behind bars who shouldn’t be there. But those examples are few and far between. Right?

Then you live through a few wars and you start to wonder if the government and its systems are quite as foolproof as you have been led to believe. Maybe you get sent to fight in one of those wars – that tends to unhinge those beliefs a bit more rapidly. Perhaps you try to navigate the medical insurance system; maybe your grandparents or parents go on Medicaid or Medicare; maybe you suddenly realize that your house was actually built on a ex-federal toxic waste dump, which explains why your water ignites in a glass; a thousand little things begin to chip away at the confidence you once felt in the rectitude of your government. DNA testing technology improves and all of a sudden you read about all these guys being released from prison because DNA has cleared them of the crimes. Oddly, you realize that a high percentage of them are Black Americans, something that probably seems like an aside to you, unless you
happen to be black and anywhere near a white person. Another little chink is taken out of the wall of your denial. Maybe you have a friend or family member who ends up fighting a legal battle and you hear about how that system really operates. If you really pay attention, you begin to wonder if the plea bargaining system is really just a way to take pressure off the courts or whether it has become a way for prosecutors to scare the holy bejeezus out of people, getting them to settle, thus boosting the conviction rates upon which career advancement depends. You don’t want to think about it too much because, after all, it’s only an issue if you are a criminal—right? You only have to worry about invasion of privacy if you have something to hide—right? Hollywood is only exaggerating in its movies—right? I mean, we all know that a good portion of the American Dream is busily spiraling down the drain; it must be at least partially due to the burgeoning impact of all the lawless types who are running around with impunity. But then the unthinkable happens; you suddenly find yourself the target of a criminal investigation. Regardless of your politics, your belief in yourself, and your belief in your government, one thing is clear—this can’t be good.

Welcome to the last ten years of my life.

Without getting into all the gory details, my transgression was entering into a business investment with no experience in
business, then entrusting a partner to run it. It didn’t help that he turned out to have a personality that was three-fifths con artist, mixed with about one-fifth WC Fields, at least from the alcohol consumptive aspect, and one fifth of Tangueray on most days.

After leading the business (actually I think there were about 14 of them by the time he was through) and me with it down the road to rack and ruin, I found myself the unwitting target of a criminal investigation by the IRS. I have learned many things about the IRS over the last ten years, mainly that those who work for it are often simply not very nice. Like the seagulls in the movie Finding Nemo their main vocabulary seems to consist of various ways of saying “mine, mine.” But unlike those seagulls, they have the whale of all whales supporting their avariciousness. Sadly, I have also learned that they apparently aspire to an ethical code derived from a deep study of Genghis Khan. Things like truth and justice are nice abstractions that are well articulated in their manuals, but once they get rolling such things aren’t even much of a speed bump on the road to conviction. The government is like Lola—whatever it wants, it gets, including you. It isn’t that I didn’t try to resist. I threw every ounce of my strength at the bus that was clearly careening in my direction. As it turned out, I made a nice Rorschach blot on the windshield.
There ensued years and years during which the government slowly built their case in preparation for the “Trial of Crabbe.” Thinking that my presumed innocence was worth protecting, I spent an inordinate amount of partly-borrowed money on attorneys whose job it was to try to shoot out the tires of the bus, but this was the government I was fighting. The amount I spent didn’t approximate one tenth of one nanosecond of operational expense for them. In contrast, what they spent pursuing me would have covered my operational expenses for about thirty lifetimes.

They were kind enough to keep me informed along the way. I heard about my indictment through my attorney and from those friends who had read the press clippings, so I knew something was going on. The government never wrote me directly to say “Dear Citizen: We have determined that you are a scum-scuzzling SOB and we are going to commence attempting to destroy you and your family. Just thought you ought to know.” It would have been a frightening, but honest communication, since that’s exactly what they set about trying to do. Instead, I simply entered the legal circus, an area that defies description to the uninitiated, and which became the most bizarre and all-consuming experience of my life.

I always thought of my government as kind of a reverse Golem. In Jewish mythology the Golem is an entity that blunders
about doing good works in spite of itself. It seemed to me that our government had the blundering part down pat, except all too often the outcome of its actions was fairly inimical to living creatures. But I had never seen my government actually in directed work, good or otherwise, partly because that is something of an oxymoron. I had only seen the kind of impersonal and seemingly disjointed activities that make us either laugh or tear out our hair. To suddenly discover that it could focus and, worse, to have me in its crosshairs gave me an entirely different perspective. Here I was, a life-long human services worker who dabbled on the side as a slightly overwhelmed businessman, suddenly a poster boy for tax-related malfeasance. I felt like someone had given me a life transplant.

Before one gets in the headlights of the federal judicial system, most of our attitudes are taken from television, that great mediator of American culture. On television these days it is a given that the prosecutors are the pursuers of truth in a system dominated by sleazy defense attorneys who try every trick in their seemingly vast repertoire of deceptive practices in an effort to get their clients to avoid appropriate consequences for their illegal activity. By the time you have gone through the system as a defendant you have a slightly different take on things. You realize that what prosecutors are often about is
trying to distort and otherwise damage the facts into a version they can sell to a jury in order to obtain a conviction. It is the disillusionment that accompanies this growing realization that is the real loss of innocence for those of us who want to believe in the system. And there are a number of steps along this path toward belief in the dark side. It starts with the grand jury.

Just the title “grand” makes one think of lofty ideals. One is invited to imagine a group of citizens sitting in a hall of judgment, listening carefully to witness after witness who is paraded in front of them, fully cognizant of their mission to protect the rights of the accused from the potential excesses of government. Wait – we forgot that last part. That’s what the founding fathers intended when they set up the grand jury process, but somewhere along the way it took a U-turn. Today, grand juries no longer examine the activity of their government but are exclusively focused on the activities and potential wrong-doings of citizens. It is a governmental arena, seemingly designed to enhance the careers of professional prosecutors. In fact, the defense isn’t even there. The vast majority of the time the only people talking to the grand jury are government representatives, and it is all conducted in secrecy. Think about that -- most grand juries have a single witness, the relevant representative of whatever government agency is
bringing the accusation. That person then offers up hearsay evidence, since the standard rules of evidence are suspended. And, if the prosecution starts to think that the grand jury is wondering about the government’s activities in a way that might result in no indictment, they simply let it lapse, convene another one, or another one, or another one, until they get one that is going to be a bit more predictable. It only took two grand juries in my case, which must mean that the prosecutors were pretty much on their game. I ended up meeting one fellow where it took four until they got one to indict. In any case, the result is, inevitably, an indictment, which is then trumpeted in the press, with the prosecution’s view being presented as fact. After all, at that point the defense hasn’t even been invited to the dance. The public reads these announcements, and then becomes the jury pool for those of the accused who are sufficiently motivated and emotionally resilient, and are willing to annihilate their finances by going to a trial. That is the grand jury process of today, and it is no wonder that defense attorneys view it with a suspicion that, over a beer, turns to open derision.

In fact, defense attorneys are fond of quoting New York Judge Sol Wachtler’s observation that the current grand jury system is so loaded to the prosecution that they can get a “ham sandwich indicted.” As my own experience with the judicial
system unfolded, I began to realize that this was more than just kvetching – there was a disturbing element of truth in the statement. And as I came to realize how the process actually worked, I started reconsidering that remark, had a beer, had another, and then got semi-serious about trying to get that sandwich indicted. Somehow, even if I wasn’t going to do it, at the time it seemed at least a much-needed diversion. But instead of ham, I decided to choose baloney, since it seemed more directly symbolic of the whole process. This campaign took some strategizing.

I should explain that there are many ways to deal with the unrelenting and unimaginable stress of going through a federal trial process. Substance abuse is a favorite, one that actually pays off later if you lose, because it translates into an ability to participate in substance abuse programming and a reduction of your prison sentence in terms of time served. It’s a little-known fact that people with documented substance abuse problems usually end up serving a smaller percentage of their prison sentences. It’s one of the many illogical consequences of America’s War on Drugs, or, as Gore Vidal liked to call it, one of the “Wars on Metaphors” to which America seems particularly prone. You know this particular war; it’s the one we lost about twenty-five years ago. Maybe we should start
declaring war on some other aspect of grammar. Perhaps we would be more successful in eliminating the use of verbs.

There are many other coping strategies for those under federal assault - panic, flight, and generalized hysteria come to mind. I chose mild dissociation and occasional flights into fantasy, with a large dose of gallows humor. The theory is that it’s harder to feel terrified when you are laughing. But it is also puts you close to the lurking bouts of hysteria that can make you appear very unmanly at times.

There were, in my case, initially four potential “persons of interest,” the appellation used by the prosecutors to designate those whom they intend to try to thoroughly psychologically destabilize. After a year or two, one had received immunity in exchange for endorsing their version of the facts (or so they hoped), and one was an accountant of sufficient standing and reputation that they decided he probably was best left a sleeping dog. That left two of us as “targets,” the more frightening term used to designate those whose personal annihilation is planned. To pass the time between panic attacks and episodes of hysteria, I set about imagining how I could spread the wealth and add a baloney sandwich as a third.

Since in the ten years that have comprised my one-sided battle with my government the federal prosecutors have never talked to me, I was forced to try to figure out how to get
information into their system by more indirect routes. Evidence was the key, although I had observed that quality certainly wasn’t a big factor. When you came down to it, there really was only one possible route – the MOI.

MOI is an acronym for “Memorandum of Interview,” a document that is produced every time a federal investigator talks to a potential witness. These MOIs form the core data from which the prosecution develops its case. They are interesting documents, to say the least. For some reason, the investigators do not tape-record these interviews; at least they did not in my case. Instead, they take notes, and then wait at least several weeks to transcribe these notes into a series of statements that are then considered facts. I don’t know how it works for you, but I’m famous for having trouble even reading my own handwriting, and as far as remembering exactly what someone said a month earlier, well, on at least one occasion in my life I found my socks in the refrigerator when I was going to grab something for lunch. But these guys are pros. I’m sure everything they write down a month later is both exactly correct and completely legible.

It is these “facts” that are the basis for the hearsay testimony of the government representatives at a grand jury. When one is conducting a defense, it is common to interview these same witnesses and it is interesting how often they tell a
different story from what was memorialized in the MOI. Come to think of it, now I understand why they don’t tape-record them. Yet, there is no way to bring these differences to light in front of a grand jury, because, you got it, there is no defense presence there. That helps keep it simple. And when you actually get to a trial, the MOIs are not presented as evidence, because the rules of evidence don’t allow it. After all, you have the witness (who by now usually has been interviewed multiple times, threatened, and thoroughly terrified by the investigators) who will give a completely unbiased report.

So these very critical documents are used in a venue where the defense has no say, and aren’t used in the venue where they can be shown up for their inaccuracies and distortions. When thought of in this way, their popularity with prosecutors becomes much more understandable. But for all their warts, they were still the only way to try to get information into the grand jury process, even if the information had to go through a prosecutorial filter in order to do so.

So it was with a fantasy MOI that I would begin my fantasy campaign. I chose my favorite MOI, the one given by my business partner after he had decided to make a plea bargain and blame all his actions on me, but before we found out that by then his mental functioning had slipped so far that his competency was in question. This was also before a competency evaluator reported
on how he had asked a home health attendant to install a window in the side of his laundry hamper so that he could have a view outside his house. It’s funny how lucid he sounded in this MOI.

This MOI spoke of secret meetings conducted between the two of us (meetings that did not occur as described, unless it was just before I put my socks in the fridge) and during which allegedly nefarious things were plotted. Here’s how I decided to approach it. I would write in the margin that, if those meetings actually occurred, there might have been a baloney sandwich on the table. I have found that seemingly idiotic observations sometimes get more attention than ones that are well thought out. I would give that note to my attorney and ask him to share it with the prosecution, since they didn’t seem to want to talk to me directly. I could imagine his odd look, but I would insist.

There would be a response, something like – “So?”

I was sure they would be intrigued, or at least mildly baffled. If nothing else, they would probably wonder if I possessed sufficient cognitive equipment to find the prison camp to which they intended to eventually send me. After all, by then they had reason to think the other “target” didn’t. So I would write another note in the margin of the MOI transcript, “and I might have put a microphone in that baloney sandwich.”
It would take longer for them to respond, for obvious reasons. Such defacing of MOIs on my part would certainly constitute a violation of something in Homeland Security rules. I imagined multiple "WTF?" text messages running up the chain of command. But eventually a response would come. As with the IRS, it may take years, but it always comes.

"Why?"

Another note. "So I could record what my partner and I actually said, because I was starting not to trust what he was saying and doing."

There would be a much longer pause this time. I’m actually a licensed clinical psychologist and not the high-powered businessman I was purported to be during my trial. In psychology there is a term called “cognitive dissonance.” When you wish to guide someone’s behavior but don’t want to trigger resistance by doing it directly, you attempt to create cognitive dissonance. That is a condition where the person has a particular behavior labeled in such a way that it runs counter to who they think they are. For example, if someone thinks of himself as a really nice guy who is also a “party animal” and has just collected his third DUI, you could point out to him that he is someone who puts others in danger through his actions. Oddly, there are times when that can help to change someone’s behavior. I was hoping to create some cognitive
dissonance with federal attorneys. In this situation, if there was any chance that they might be headed down a road that would lead to one of the few times that they lost a trial, that could get them labeled a “loser” and potentially be a career killer, or at least a career slower. So I knew that they would be motivated to protect themselves from that outcome at almost all costs.

Eventually (I fantasized) the response would come. “Did you do this?” (In case you are lost, ‘did I put a microphone in the baloney sandwich?’).

A direct question. A nibble on the line. There’s no way they could resist.

I would tell my attorney, who by now I’m sure would be looking at me with a combination of slight disdain and overt concern, “I might have – but in all the excitement. . . .” I would again insist that he dutifully convey the response.

Then it would come. I was sure of it.

“We would like to see those tapes.”

My final response. “Then you’ll have to indict the baloney sandwich.”

Now – of course none of that really occurred. This is one of a few times in this book that I am recounting something that was strictly a fantasy. I’ll always let you know when that occurs. I simply wish I could have been detached enough to try
something like that. As you go through the whole investigation process, leading up to something that you know is likely going to destroy your life as you know it, there are times when flights of fancy are the only thing that stand between you and a complete meltdown. To this day, I wonder if they would have done it. Now, that would have been a story for the defense attorneys in the watering hole – the baloney sandwich that faced conspiracy charges.

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I think what actually drove the import of it all home was my first visit to the federal courthouse in Denver. After going through the obligatory metal detector, my wife and I found our way to the appropriate floor and got off the elevator into a long hallway. The only seats were cold, backless, marble benches, undoubtedly a part of the government’s well-known austerity program. Actually, I think the whole building was designed to create an image of Asgaard. There, on the overly large set of double-doors, was a sign saying, “The United States vs. William Crabbe.” Now I’ve watched and played a lot of basketball over the years and I know a mismatch when I see one.

This was a whopper.

The most powerful country on Earth, one that either removes or shoots foreign heads of state at will, an entity that ultimately faced down the Evil Empire in its heyday, wanted
little old me. More precisely, it wanted to disembowel little old me. I looked at my attorney on my right - he’s tall. I looked at my attorney on my left - he’s also tall. And I know I’m tall - but those doors were much taller, and that was just from the hallway. Up close they looked like redwood trunks reaching up toward the ceiling until the tops were obscured by the bank of clouds overhead. It wasn’t looking good and I hadn’t even made it into the courtroom.

But my wife and I decided to “cowboy up,” as some say up in our neck of the woods and moved to enter the courtroom. We pushed on the doors - they didn’t move. Looking carefully we determined that they weren’t locked; they were just heavy as hell. Justice is a weighty thing after all. We looked at our attorneys but both seemed to have gotten something under a fingernail at exactly the same moment. Storming enemy gates was apparently not covered in the small print of the contract. My wife and I threw our combined weights into the doors and after an interminable period, they very slowly gave way. I had at least made it into the courtroom, even if I was panting slightly from the exertion.

Inside was a setting straight out of a movie, one designed to strike awe into the hearts of all. Beautiful wood was everywhere you turned. There was a sense of balance to the arrangement of the tables, jury box and witness stand, clearly
with Feng Shui intent. I decided it was likely that Martha Stewart had provided input into the design of the courtroom, probably during her period of federal incarceration. There were also pews out front for court observers, lending a religious quality to the experience that could not be missed. And it all pointed to the central dais, where the federal legal deity would soon be making an appearance.

Now as time went on I was to have two judges. The first was a seemingly kindly man who died of a brain tumor before I ever got to trial. His replacement was a woman with a reputation of being a fearsome creature to all who came before her. She had that rare combination of barely masked hostility, digital thinking, and complete condescension that made her edicts both painful and tedious at the same time. I have to say, being threatened tediously was a new experience for me. Many times over the course of my numerous hearings I had the image of OZ the Great and Terrible spring unbidden to my mind. I thought of the judge as a floating head, somehow sublimely levitating above the show that was going on in the courtroom. Perhaps it was simply a measure of my own dissociation but I was convinced that somewhere someone was pulling levers behind a curtain. It’s the only thing that made sense of some of the screwiness of the experience.
Now that I had entered the courtroom I took my place in the anointed spot, the defendant’s table, where I was flanked on each side by my two attorneys. As time went on I was to be joined at that table by my IRS consultant, a man who had spent his career pursuing people like me, only to decide later in life that perhaps that hadn’t been the nicest thing to do. He now consults with other targets, letting them know exactly what is going through the minds of the federal prosecutors and IRS investigators, which is a good thing since it is beyond the divination of us mere mortals. I would frequently look at him to see if it hurt. My wife took her place in one of the pews at the back of the room from which vantage point she said I looked very small. Sitting before the looming backdrop of OZ’s head, I felt very small.

This was to be an experience that was repeated many, many times as I went through an endless series of hearings in presumed preparation for my eventual trial. Personally, I didn’t need all the pomp and circumstance. I would have been perfectly happy if we all had just sat down and talked things through. But I discovered early on that literally no one is interested in doing that. The defense team is scared to death that the prosecutors will use any information they can get in as vicious a way as possible (something that I have to say turned out to be true) and the prosecutors just don’t seem interested.
In ten years, they never did talk to me. It was clear very early that they didn’t need to talk to me; they already ‘knew’ what had happened. Having decided the facts, little things like evidence and any statements to the contrary were simply to be discounted and ignored, or, in some cases, destroyed. Such was the environment into which I had wandered, quite unwittingly. In fact, I discovered that it was not a wit-rich environment.

As I developed my expertise in the area of hearing attendance, one of the things I found most interesting was how often I had no idea what was going on in the courtroom. I’m an educated person and like to think that I grasp things fairly quickly, but the discourse of law is a polyglot somewhere between Coptic Greek and Esperanto. I think it borrows its very sentence construction from the kind of prose you see in books written in about the 1700s.

“Wherefore the agent of the first part, in consideration of the actions of the agent of the third part, notwithstanding the expressed concerns of the agent of the second part, whose beliefs in the intentions of the agent of the second part, if divided by the square root of the number of vowels in the name of the agent of the third part, on Tuesday, do therefore attest that the said agent did most foully and with great lack of forbearance fail to withstand the unmitigated gall of the agent of the fourth part, whose intrusion into the above was
grammatically resisted, does therefore lead to the inevitable conclusion that said agent’s actions would be considered a willful abandonment of just cause and need for due process . . . and can we all go to lunch?”

More than once I found myself nodding off at inappropriate times during hearings, something that was probably not lost on the judge. I know for a fact that on one occasion my snoring woke us both up because she shot me a baleful glance.

It’s not that the hearings are poorly planned. Hell, they space them three to four months apart so that people can plan for them extensively. Then they go on for hours while all parties dissect the most miniscule and mundane points. After each hearing we members of the defense team would convene in a small room outside the courtroom and try to make sense out of what had happened. No one seemed to really know. It got so difficult to tell that we assigned tasks to each observer.

“You watch the judge; I’ll watch the prosecutor.”

“No, you watch the judge. The last time I did it I had a parking ticket when I got back to my car.”

“I’ll watch the court reporter. He’s the only one who looks like he knows what he’s doing.”

“How about the clerk? She’s the one with the computer; that’s usually a modern sign of competence.”
“No, I checked with her and she’s on the internet most of the time. But if you need something from Amazon while we’re here, talk to her.”

“There’s that guy in the back with the gun. What about him?”

“The last time I looked at him his hand went to his holster.”

“OK – I’ll watch the judge but you have to pay my ticket if I get one.”

Usually, when we left, we had no real idea of what had happened and whether it meant anything to anyone. But, I was told, “We’re creating a record.” This is the phrase you hear a lot from attorneys during a criminal case. What it means is they are trying to stack the deck as much as possible, hoping that when you lose the judge will have screwed something up so that you can take her to task about it at the next level. It makes a weird kind of sense, but only if you accept the assumption that the whole process is fundamentally adversarial. There are really three combatants in any trial: the defense, the prosecution, and the court. Aside from just trying to survive the onslaught of rhetoric from the attorneys the judge is also painfully aware that whoever loses is going to try to attack her actions at the next level. So, in a way, she
distrusts both sets of attorneys from the outset. After all, they are both motivated to make her look bad.

Into this odd circus is thrown the hapless defendant, who typically has no clue as to what is going on at any time. It inspires neither confidence nor trust, which is probably a good thing, since it shouldn’t.

In a legal action that is headed for trial, particularly in federal court, the hearings go on for years. Such was the case for me. After a while you get kind of used to it. You learn where to park most cheaply, how metal detectors at the federal courthouse differ from those at airports, what you can and cannot take into a courtroom, the best way to get in and out of downtown, and what jokes to avoid in the hallways. You also get desensitized to the whole courtroom experience. You start realizing that the patina on the wood paneling that was initially so impressive is actually starting to fade a bit, and that other things about the courtroom are starting to look a bit shabby. But most of all you start to realize that everyone is playing a game. It is a complicated game, one that is infused with an unbelievable level of self-importance among the players, but it is a game nonetheless. It’s not that my attorneys weren’t fine people, because they were, and are. It’s not that they didn’t believe in me or care about me and my family, because they did, and do. It’s not even that the opposition
players are evil, awful people, although as time goes on and you
watch them operate it becomes harder and harder to convince
yourself of that. It’s just that one and all are players in a
societal game. And as with all games, there are rules that hold
sway much of the time. Yet the rules are awfully vague and
there is only one absolute referee. Both sides try to work that
referee with a vengeance, but it doesn’t take long to figure out
who’s the home team. In federal court it is the prosecution,
hands down. Just as if you were watching your favorite team
play an away game, as the defendant you realize that you are
going to have to also overcome hometown officiating to have any
chance of victory.

It made me wonder if Las Vegas has a line somewhere on
federal court cases. “It’s 7 to 4 for the prosecution in Crabbe
vs. the U.S. We have insider information that his attorney has
a cold and we all know they are weak off the bench. Wait –
we’ve just learned that the lead prosecutor had a fight with his
wife yesterday so he may be off his game a bit. This is the
third time that’s happened this judicial season. If I were the
Department of Justice, I’d either charge his wife with
obstruction of justice or trade him for a second-rounder from
Harvard Law. Throw in an IRS investigator and it would be about
straight up with respect to the GS level salary cap.”
Much, much later, I discovered a monograph that had been written by my judge to a bunch of law students. In it she confirmed my fears and boldly compared the process of going to trial with gambling in Las Vegas. ‘Don’t complain if you lose, she said, you’re the one that decided to throw the dice.’ Somehow I thought there was something in the process that related to Lady Justice with her scales, something that distinguished if from shooting craps on her bench. Who knew?

After a while, not only does one get desensitized, sadly, one loses some measure of respect for the process. You begin to realize that you are really caught in a competition, one where truth and justice have become archaic concepts. It’s all about winning these days. And just like in professional sports, money can have an impact on the winner. Once I realized that I felt a little less comfortable each time I looked at that Crabbe vs. the U.S. notice. My net worth doesn’t even reach the level of one solid illegal campaign contribution. So it was with increasing discomfort and trepidation that I slowly closed in on the Trial of Crabbe.

Why, you might ask, did I even decide to take this whole thing to trial? Hadn’t I read the statistics that say the federal government wins well in excess of 80% of its cases, and that the penalties for those with the temerity to go to trial are usually much, much worse than for those who simply plea
bargain? Didn’t I realize that they could outspend me about 50 to 1, before breakfast on the first day? Well, yes, I did realize those things. But, oddly, I thought that, although being a bit stupid in some of my actions, I certainly hadn’t set out to commit a crime. And I was naïve enough to think that mattered. Obviously I hadn’t watched enough movies.

Now that we had actually reached the point of a trial it was time to obtain one of the main missing ingredients – the jury. I suspect that everyone reading this has received a jury notice at one time or another in his or her life. In my experience it usually arrives in the mail, referencing a date that happens to coincide with the funeral of an important relative or a long-planned lunch with a critical business client. Rarely does it seem to come at a time when you are just waiting to take about two weeks out of your life to sit on a jury, for which you get paid $3 a day. Also in my experience just about everyone who has ever gotten a jury notice figures out some way not to have to report. It’s not that they don’t want to do their civic duty – they just don’t want to do it right now. So by the time you have reached the point of having an actual jury pool it consists mostly of people who couldn’t figure out how to get out of it. Not that long ago in the large town near us they were having so much trouble with responsiveness to these notices that they started picking people
off the street on the day of the trial to fill the juries.
Knowing these facts, it was with some Kierkegaardian dread that
I viewed the potential jury of my peers that filed into the
courtroom.

The term for the jury selection process is “voir dire” and
it consists of a series of questions asked by both sets of
attorneys. Actually, in federal cases sets of questions are
submitted to the judge who determines the final list and does
the asking. Of course these questions are designed to attempt
to uncover any biases that a potential juror might harbor
towards either the defense or prosecution, or regarding the
issues underlying the cases. For example, in my case (which was
a tax case) one of the potential jurors responded to the
prosecution’s questions by saying that his family had been
hounded unmercifully and nearly destroyed by the IRS over a 5-
year period. He didn’t last long. I should explain that voir
dire is a lengthy and cumbersome process where each side is
allowed to reject a set number of jurors. There is much
research and consultation available on this topic, if one wants
to pay for it. It’s funny how that works. I think you might be
able to get your case assigned to an inflatable judge if you
were willing to pay for it. Anyway, I tried to figure out what
criteria the prosecution was using in deciding who to reject.
One clear issue seemed to be an obvious ability to understand
the issues of the case. If the person showed inklings of that, he or she was gone.

Our side tried to use more scientific means - we numbered the jurors and knocked off all those whose number was either prime or fell in the Fibonacci sequence. We also denied anyone who was wearing turquoise, out of respect for the depletion of Native American cultural reserves. After hours of this there was a prolonged delay while both sides made their final determinations. I found myself singing the theme from “Final Jeopardy” in my head as the judge delivered a lengthy soliloquy about the construction of the federal courthouse in Denver, something she had clearly been watching recently on the History channel. Her discourse was a bit more diverting than our deliberations about the jurors and seemed such an odd practice that, in spite of myself, I found myself listening to her. But in the end the buzzer went off, we had a jury, and were ready to proceed.

The next two weeks consisted of a mind-numbing sequence of witnesses, which in the end generated some eighteen hundred pages of transcript. There were many, many side conversations with the judge and all of the other things that you have come to expect from watching TV. But what you don’t see is the true emotional undertones of the event itself.
My case was actually a fairly complicated tax case. As I was soon to learn, it was too complicated for both the jury and the judge. But I didn’t know that at first. It was with a mounting sense of concern that I began to realize that beneath all the pomp and circumstance, there were only a few people that really seemed to understand the relevant tax law, and worse, they were all seated at the defense table with me. I listened with trepidation as the judge started making ruling after ruling that seemed to reflect this basic ignorance. For some reason, that worried me. I slowly came to understand that this case was way over all of their heads, not because they were impaired human beings, but because they were just human beings. The law governing this case was sufficiently complex that they didn’t have a chance. I was especially concerned about the lady in the front row of the jury box who seemed to be asleep every time I looked, concerned enough that I decided to bring it up.

“Yo, guys.” Me prodding my attorneys. “Number 4 is asleep again.”

“That’s OK,” was the response.

“That’s OK?”

“Yeah, she’ll probably just vote with the majority.”

I mulled this over and had the fleeting thought that perhaps she was an aficionado of sleep learning, but doubted it.
“But what about that ‘all we need is one’ stuff? Shouldn’t we try for 1 out of 12 instead of 1 out of 11?”

My attorneys looked at me patiently. “Bill, do you have any idea how boring this stuff is for all of them?”

Good point. Scary, but good.

The other jurors, while generally attentive, looked mostly mystified. I wondered if they were trying to decide how they were going to spend the $3 a day they were earning. I was developing a very bad feeling about the whole affair.

In retrospect, I remember when it first hit me that this whole thing really wasn’t exactly how it had been presented in my high school civics class. I had just watched the fifth witness’ testimony get carefully distorted by the prosecution, so that it resembled an Einsteinian twisting of the space-time continuum. Up to that point I had chalked up such distortions to differences in points of view, recognizing that the federal guys were just institutionally paranoid and assumed they had infected the prosecutor with the paranoia virus. I can be very naïve. But as I watched the prosecution manipulate witness after witness, the celestial harps began to play and I had an epiphany. If wasn’t that they were just paranoid and thought this stuff they were promoting was true – I started listening to their questions more closely and realized they were trying to elicit responses that they knew weren’t true. I admit, that
rocked me. Try as I might, I couldn’t file that in my brain under any other term than “lying.” Then I started realizing that there was also a dark smugness to the process, one born of almost unbridled power. The epiphany was complete. It really was all about winning. It was right then that I knew I was well and truly screwed.

There had been some inklings about this in the whole investigative run up to the trial, even for someone as abnormally trusting as I. For example, the investigators had tried to seriously terrorize a guy who worked for me, and who had been far closer to the operations of the company in question than I. He had been taken down to Denver for interviews by the FBI and Justice Department on three separate occasions. Each time they produced one of their standards MOIs, which were later disclosed to the defense. His third visit lasted more than three hours. During that visit they threatened him with unclear consequences if he didn’t endorse their version of events, the same version they were later to push in court. To his credit he is an ethical man. Despite their pressure, he finally got exasperated and said, “I’m not going to lie for you!” They must have thought he actually meant it because that caused them to terminate the interview, after making him sit alone contemplating his future for another hour. When we got the MOI for those three-plus hours of interrogation it was about ten
lines long. Obviously, they didn’t feel a need to report most of what actually occurred, including his exasperated comment. It made me wonder what else they weren’t sharing with us. Of course, there was also the MOI that included a line saying the individual had reviewed and approved the MOI from a prior interview, when their own records showed that the earlier transcript had yet to be produced. Post-epiphany I now have to say that the more you look at the details in these cases, the more you start wondering who the criminals are. But, hey, this was my trial, not theirs, wasn’t it? If I wished to avoid prison, it was up to me to prove my innocence, not them.

As the days ground on, I found myself starting to disassociate a bit. I started seeing it as a big Kabuki theater production, where the actors were wearing masks and jabbing at each other using words instead of spears. There was also this persistent sense that no one was actually saying what he or she felt or really thought. It was one of those times when being a psychologist was detrimental, because there was this continuous disconnect between the visual and the emotional experience. I could see what they were saying, but I could feel that they didn’t mean it. In a very weird way, I realized that it actually wasn’t personal. Yet it was my life that was the plot line of the play. And above it all sat this tribal shaman,
cloaked in a black robe and occasionally uttering a primal grunt in the direction of one of the actors.

I should explain that sometimes I find myself seeing life without its civilized veneer. It’s kind of a phenomenological experience, one where the trappings of normalcy melt away and you are caught seeing an event as it really is. When this happens to me I see almost a reverse evolution at work. For some reason, this happens to me most often when I am driving. I will notice my hand upon the steering wheel and think “claw.” I then notice just how closely my human hand approximates that of a lower primate, and how my ancestors’ need to brachiate through the trees translates so well to manipulating a steering wheel. Usually I successfully refocus before I crash.

With respect to the trial, for three weeks I vacillated between seeing my experience in the dignified and ultra-serious cloaking that our modern and very self-impressed judicial system tries to sell, and as a simple tribal event. There was really nothing much to distinguish this proceeding from one that was likely carried out by our ancestors, probably around a fire and wrapped in skins. Undoubtedly, at some point in antiquity someone did something to offend the tribe and was essentially brought up before the tribal court. I suspect the same degree of posturing, finger-pointing and general mumbo-jumbo greeted that event as well. Now we simply try to package it in a more
attractive box. But the feeling is the same. And in the end it came my time to testify and it mattered not whether I was doing so in an ancient or modern ritual. It still tends to get your attention.

Unless one has ever testified as a defendant in his or her own trial, there is no way I can begin to describe the experience. There is this strong desire to tell your side of the story, because up to that point the prosecution has done everything in their power to obscure and distort that information. It’s a little like trying to explain your reasoning when you did something as a kid. It turned out wrong, but you didn’t mean it to, and you would really like your parents to understand. But usually when you are a kid you don’t have to deal with a highly skilled person trying to twist and distort everything you say to your parents. It’s generally bad enough just dealing with the looks from your mother. Imagine a mother who is being backed up by a Greek chorus of accusing voices that contradicts everything you say, as you say it.

“I didn’t break the china bowl on purpose; I was just trying to see how many I could stack without dropping them.”

(Chorus) “You know that you always hated that bowl and were looking for the first excuse to drop it so that you could HURT YOUR MOTHER!”

“But, but, but, . . . “
“No buts, Billy, it was a clear case of conspiracy to commit bowl abuse and further, Your Honor (Mom), Billy should be locked in his room for the next year!”

It’s kind of like that. Everything you say gets jerked six ways from breakfast. Just in trying to tell your story you feel like you have to throw your brain into hyper-drive to keep ahead of the trick questions. I can’t imagine what it would be like if one was actually lying. Just telling the truth is exhausting. But your testimony ends – they can’t keep you on the stand forever. After all, they all have to go to lunch – often.

And as it is with your testimony, so it is with trials. There comes a point when everyone has said just about as much as can be possibly said about anything and each attorney makes his impassioned plea for justice. By then everyone has forgotten that justice is any of part of the proceeding so it’s good that people get reminded. The jury then renders its verdict, which in the case of federal jury cases is almost always “guilty” of something, and one moves further down the line.

Crime and punishment. That’s what it is all about. The verification of innocence or guilt. Perhaps, perhaps not. You had to be there.
Ever since I found out that I was going to be incarcerated there has been a part of me that has been searching for the cosmic purpose behind it all. I knew that it couldn’t simply be that I was some heinous criminal-type who had simply gotten slovenly in the way he went about the commission of his crimes. There had to be more to the story. Since I am by nature a person who looks for the big picture in all things, I assumed some kind of spiritual base to it all. Actually, first I considered the kind of insidious government conspiracy that is perpetrated by one of those shadow organizations that is only
known to Jason Patrick or Julia Roberts. I figured that if that were the case, they should be contacting me at any time to let me know what my role in the movie was supposed to be.

But that didn’t last long. When no such contact emerged I reverted to the quest for spiritual guidance. One of the nice things about spirituality (as I conceptualize it) is that it gives potential meaning to the most random events. Rather than simply being a victim of an overbearing and overarching government organization that episodically tries to terrorize and destroy selected members of its citizenry, it causes much less cognitive dissonance to assume that there is a great and unknowable cosmic purpose to it all, one that is simply eluding a person’s ability to comprehend it. So I was settling comfortably into that way of thinking as I prepared to report to the Prison Labor Camp at Florence, Colorado.

Then the day came, and I pulled up to the gates of the prison camp. Actually, I was let off at the gate, and then taken in a van up to the actual doors of the place. And there, as I prepared to enter through the gates into my newly acquired residence, it all became clear. There was this sign and it said “Be All You Can Be With The BOP.” BOP is what those of us who wish we didn’t know realize is the acronym for the Bureau of Prisons. After a few months the phrase “Backwards on Purpose” unaccountably springs to mind, but at this early juncture I was
a novitiate in search of satori. And here it was in black and white. The meaning to it all. I was being invited to “Be All That I Could Be,” something that had apparently eluded me during the prior fifty-nine years of my life. How could I have known? It was all waiting for me just on the other side of those doors. Hallelujah. Somewhere in the background I heard a celestial chorus, or it might have just been an intensification of the tinnitus that has been an increasing problem for the past several years. I didn’t see welcoming angels or anything so obvious. But the message was clear. There was meaning in my future. All I had to do was find my way. So, feeling considerably buoyed, I went in.

The first thing that happened was I was told to take off all my clothes and put them in a box so that they could be mailed to my wife. When my wife got that package, later she called it “Still Life – Husband in a Box” and took pictures of it. Having stripped, I was issued the beginnings of my new wardrobe: green pants and a t-shirt, with sandals that didn’t fit. They were to be mine until I could get issued the boots that didn’t fit, which I was later able to exchange for the other boots that didn’t fit. But I was also subjected to a strip search, complete with an external cavity search, as it’s known in the parlance. That’s where you bend over and spread your ass cheeks for some poor guy who is being paid to look
while you do it. In most cultures, that would be considered a sign of disrespect. But it is a measure of how upside down everything is in prison that somehow you are the one being disrespected while mooning the guard. Had I known this was going to occur I would have inserted a note there for the guard to read so he could pass the time more productively, something like, “Hi, lose something? Call 1-800-………..” While still in my anally inverted position, I had the idle thought – “is this part of being all I can be?” Certainly, I wasn’t aware of any hidden talents that were lodged there. But, hey, admittedly, I was new to the place. Maybe he knew something that I didn’t.

Once upright and dressed, I was taken to my cubicle in Summit Unit, one of the two residential buildings on what is called “the compound.” My guide was an obviously disinterested CO, one who clearly desired to be elsewhere, possibly hoping to locate his missing teeth. After taking me into the building, he pointed to an open bed frame and said, “If you don’t want to sleep on springs you better go find a mattress.” With that he immediately left. That made some sense to me in the grand scheme of things – they were trying to teach me a combination of innovative thinking and semi-advanced hunter-gatherer skills. I walked through several long pods of cubicles, exchanging glances with a very interesting group of people who were to be my new extended roommates. I finally found a mattress that looked
unattached, grabbed it, then looked over my shoulder all the way back to my cubicle, expecting to be pursued by some irate inmate who had been caught in the process of changing his sheets. I then set about to make my bed with the sheets that had been provided.

This was another learning experience, obviously designed by the math teacher in the education department that they had touted so highly on the website I had visited prior to arrival. You see, the mattress was about two-and-a-half feet by six feet. Ignoring the fact that I am over six feet tall, the sheet was about two-and-three-fifths feet by six-and-one-fifth feet. Even in my slightly overwhelmed state of mind, I knew that the resulting bed making operation was going to be a challenge. But there was a template to work from. On the board outside the pod there was a very pretty picture of a properly made bed, quite military-appearing in its precision, complete with the low-grade threats that seemed to accompany all directions in my new environment. In fact, the whole place had a paramilitary feel to it and for some reason the “Be All You Can Be” slogan sounded vaguely familiar. It could be all those commercials during football games. But the main problem with the military bed design was one of resources. Try as I might, I couldn’t figure out how to get a sheet that was just slightly larger than the top of the mattress to form military corners. I decided that
this was another test. The first time I had been given a hint that I needed to go forage for a mattress - but this time, I had been given less information for the puzzle. That way, they were trying to ease me into the kind of problem solving I was going to need to do in order to survive in this new environment. That realization raised two possibilities in my mind. Either there was a larger sheet hidden somewhere in the pod that I was supposed to find, then surreptitiously swap for mine, or there was a “sheet-extender” mechanism somewhere close at hand. I had no idea what such a thing might look like or how it might work, but I’ve never been the most mechanical of individuals and am used to being confronted by mildly baffling things of this kind. So I went on a second search.

There are certain rules that you learn to apply when living in a close situation with a bunch of other men. This is particularly true if a number of them have been incarcerated for a lot of years. It’s good to know those rules, but they aren’t listed on a piece of paper that is given to you when you come in the door. Some of them are politely pointed out to you; others you are just sort of expected to divine. Then, there is the less-than-polite pointing out that you really want to avoid, if possible. One such rule is that you don’t go rummaging around other inmates’ cubicles looking for things like sheet-extenders. Actually, you don’t even go into their cubes unless they are
there. More actually, you aren’t even supposed to look into them as you walk down the common hallway. When there is no privacy it becomes something that is closely guarded, such as it is. So my quest had some challenging elements to it right off the top. I was looking for something without being able to look in any of the places where it might be, assuming that it existed in the first place, which was highly questionable. I elected to wander aimlessly about for a while, I think hoping that one might simply appear in front of me, perhaps at the “white” end of a black hole. Needless to say, the odds were against this. Eventually, I gave up and simply returned to my cubicle. I laid the sheets on top of the mattress and called it good. Oddly, by the morning, they had simply balled into a schmushed mess around my feet and I was sleeping directly on the plastic mattress, to which I stuck every time I moved. It was kind of the forced defoliation method of sleeping.

This went on for a few days, with each morning greeting me with all my sheets wound around a different portion of my anatomy and less and less skin on my back. I commented on this idly to my “cellie,” the other term that is often used to describe the person who shares your two-man cubicle. He was having issues of his own, but he was an ex-marine and was used to taking whatever hill confronted him, so a bed-making challenged near-sixty-year-old wasn’t too formidable to him. I
commented that my wife was always giving me a hard time about how I made a bed, and that; anyway, we used duvets instead of sheets and blankets. I think “duvet” escaped him, but he was genial about it all. He was still reeling from trying to figure out how a misdemeanor DUI had earned him a year in federal prison. Beds were small potatoes. He said, “Let me show you a trick I learned in the marines.” He took my bottom sheet, distinguishable because it was about a millimeter longer than my top sheet, and tied the corners together under the ends of the mattress. Of course, to do this he had to basically turn the six-foot mattress into a five-foot mattress, something I pointed out to him, not wanted to appear like I was looking a gift horse in the mouth, but because I wasn’t sure that I could make my body form the sharp U-shape required in order to use the mattress for sleeping. It looked more appropriate to be used as a tent. Said he, “Don’t worry, just leave it there and the mattress will reform.” I admit that I watched it suspiciously throughout the day, because I simply didn’t believe him. But lo and behold, come nighttime, the damn thing was laying flat. I didn’t take the sheet off for a month.

So this “Being All I Could Be” was definitely more complex than it appeared at first blush. There was a hunter-gatherer component, an environmental manipulation component, and
certainly, a requirement to rework my thinking about certain social mores. I figured there was much more to come.

And I’d only been there two days.

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As time passed, I found myself eagerly awaiting the next installment of my learning experience. I assumed that I would be given some staff guidance in this endeavor so kept a close eye on the “call-out sheet” that was posted in the main area on a daily basis. This is the sheet that tells inmates what appointments they have for each upcoming day. Being new, I wasn’t sure what to expect to see on that sheet, but had been told by several people that it was a very important document to which one must always stay attuned. One thing you learn early on is that you exist at the beck and call of all staff, lucid or not. Should you hear your last name barked by any person you are expected to orient immediately in the direction of the sound and perform whatever action is demanded. For some reason this involved a lot of pat-downs at the very least. There were so many, in fact, that I was starting to suspect that there was something titillating about them for the staff. I wondered if maybe they had all taken an in-service on “Eroticism in the Pat-Down.” After all, a lot of them were cooped up in this place for very long hours. But then, there was also the Deep
Testicular Pat-Down which seems primarily designed to relocate your balls into your middle ears.

The best example of expected inmate responsivity concerned the PA system that was prevalent throughout the compound. One was expected to have one’s ear half-attuned to that intercom at all times. Now this was one of the many inmate gotchas that I was learning dominated my new environment. You see, the intercom didn’t reach all portions of the compound. So there was this requirement that you snap to when you heard your name called over the intercom, yet often it couldn’t be heard. This was particularly true in the chapel, where subversive praying could cause an inmate to callously disregard the beckoning voice from above, which seemed like it should be a contradiction in terms. It was also true on the running track at the back of the compound, which was used on a daily basis by a large number of people. Rather than put a speaker out there, they simply expected people to strain to hear the nearest one, which was about 100 feet away. It was also not to be heard in the gym, the library, or any of the classrooms. In fact, when I think about it, I’m not sure where you could actually hear it. If you were standing directly under a speaker it was usually audible, and the speakers generally projected to at least the front half of the sleeping units, particularly at two in the morning. The rest was a total crap shoot.
Recognizing that they were dealing with a flawed system, the camp administrators had taken certain steps to attempt to correct it. First, they seemed to train no one in the use of the intercom. So some people created a sound wave that would about knock you over if you happened to be standing close to a speaker, while others spoke in such a feathery whisper that no one could understand a word. Then there were the people who appeared only to make announcements when they were eating or chewing ball bearings. It is said that Demosthenes, the Greek orator who allegedly suffered from a cleft palate, practiced his diction by standing on the shores of the Aegean Sea and filling his mouth with pebbles while still making himself speak clearly. I think there were some Greek scholars on staff at this camp. The rest took their lead from Brando’s Don Corleone.

Second, the camp had approved the use of radios with ear buds for inmates. Not I-pods, mind you, or other MP3 players – for reasons that were completely mysterious – radios. Oddly, they sold them at the commissary, presumably with some sort of mark-up. Scratch the “mysterious” in the above. That meant that just about everyone under the age of forty was walking around the compound with ear buds in place at all times. Most conversations began with a sentence, followed by a quizzical look, the removal of the ear buds, and a repeat of the question. I have no idea how these people ever heard the intercom at all.
In a final stroke of administrative genius (one that had Department of Justice collusion) they had decided to incarcerate about one hundred elderly or near-elderly men on this compound. Since all of the administrators that I saw were much younger they had no idea what this means. Just about every location on the camp had a steady background noise, if not from malfunctioning machinery, then from the generally ceaseless racket that seemingly is one of the earmarks of all younger generations. Against this backdrop of cacophony most of the older guys couldn’t hear much of anything. For the first two weeks I thought I had been placed in a very strange setting where the two most common names were “Huh?” and “What?” I started working on a draft document for administration recommending surgical implants of wireless communication devices. Given that it would represent a near total violation of our civil liberties, I assumed they would be all for it. I figured it was the only shot we old guys had at meeting the response-time demands of the site.

When I finally was beckoned for the next step in my progress towards self-enlightenment, it was in the form of a listing on the call-out sheet that I was going to see the camp psychologist.

Now this was an event to which I was actually looking forward. Being a psychologist myself, I thought of it as a
chance for some collegial bonding. “Hi, I’m Dr. Bill and wondered if I could be of any assistance to you in the performance of your work.” After all, it was a work camp and this was an area where I had some experience. I would beat ending up in plumbing where I had neither experience nor aptitude. Of course, there were certain ethical barriers to me hanging out a shingle in my living unit, but I thought there still might be some way I could contribute. So, thinking that I had a rare opportunity in front of me, I went to my appointment.

I took a chair next to about eight other inmates, outside of an office that was labeled “Meeting Room V173.” I wasn’t sure exactly what to make of that. It couldn’t have been the 173rd version of meeting room design, since it looked exactly like every other room in the immediate area and they all bore different numbers. Nor was it likely that there were 173 rooms in the whole complex, let along just the V wing. I seriously couldn’t think of a single reason for that label but I like wine so I chose to think of it as “Vintage 173.” One thing was clear. This was not one individual’s office, which meant that this was a circuit-riding psychologist who didn’t merit a name on the door.

As I sat there, I noticed that his meetings were running about five minutes, which seemed a little short for an initial interview, down from the sixty to ninety minutes that I had
learned to expect for an initial review of a patient in the mental health system. That suggested that his goals for the interview were modest. I tried to while away the waiting time by imagining what one could actually accomplish clinically in five minutes. You could pick up on body odors or evidence of drool. If the person was jerking uncontrollably or answered all the questions by saying “green” you would probably learn something, but there really isn’t much in-depth assessment that can occur in such a limited time frame. Then, my turn came. Now, this was early in my stay and I admit that I was struggling with the adjustment. For some reason, I kept expecting the prosecutor to show up and say, “Hey, we were only kidding. We know this isn’t right. Funny, huh?” But they never did. So I wasn’t at my most electric in terms of personality when I sat down in the chair opposite my potential colleague.

Right off the bat, I had the unbidden thought – “I have hemorrhoids older than this guy.” He began the drone – the explanation of the limits of confidentiality in forensic situations, something I had taught to graduate students as part of classes in professional ethics on and off for about twenty years. Not wanting to spend three of my five minutes on this topic, I interrupted him and asked him if he had read my PSI (Pre-Sentencing Investigation Report). This is the written report from the probation department that contains the only
source of information that any camp officials had about me or my case. In my experience at the camp, no one had ever actually read it. Most of the time I think that’s just as well, since it was filled with factual inaccuracies and distortions about my case. But it also has background data that I thought might be appropriate to this situation. He admitted that he had not. So thinking to save some time, I told him I was a Licensed Psychologist and that I understood the limits of confidentiality in a forensic situation as they applied to me. That thawed things a bit and we started chatting about what I was doing in prison. First, I told him it was a bad business deal that had been misinterpreted by his employers and didn’t involve psychology. Unable to completely inhibit myself, I went on to comment that I was being charitable in describing it as “misinterpretation” by his employers. Lying, and both distorting and destroying evidence in the pursuit of a pre-conceived fantasy was more accurate. He asked me how I was doing with it all. I responded, “Twenty years ago, I used to go into the County Jail, providing services to inmates twice a week and did that for about eight years. So imagine yourself about twenty years from now sitting on this side of the table talking to someone like you. Then, you’ll probably have a pretty good idea how I’m doing.” He looked a little unnerved by that. I
I understood completely.

Anyway, he finished his assessment, which consisted of looking at a brief self-report form I had filled out the day I was taken into the camp. All the information was from me, so unless I told him about my various mental health issues, he had no reason to think I had any. He certainly didn’t ask any questions that would have revealed any. In fact, I concluded the whole procedure was something more like what we used to call a “sniff test,” where you did a very cursory and extremely limited quick read on someone, usually because the situation did not allow for a more in-depth interview, something like rapid triage in an ER. Speaking professionally, why a more in-depth interview was not both possible and more appropriate in this context was beyond me. It seemed to me that knowing if someone was or was not harboring homicidal delusions could be useful in a prison. In fact, it seemed to be pretty poor medicine and I left feeling remarkably unfulfilled. I had found a colleague who seemed genial enough, but who didn’t seem like he was going to be much of a resource for anything. Actually, it didn’t seem like there were any psychological services where I could assist, and I was beginning to realize that the last thing I would want to do was been seen in the camp as anything approximating a functioning psychologist. Nor did I feel like I was going to
get much help in the personal development/rehabilitation end of things. His only comment on that was “there is going to be nothing for you here and you should make your own program.” His concrete suggestion was “maybe you should read all the Great Books.” For what it is worth, my mother had seen to it that I read the Great Books, I had found most not to be all that great, and really didn’t want to repeat the experience. Oh well, it was prison camp, not band camp.

I left his office and wandered on down to my unit with the bloom fading from my rose, thinking that “Being All I Could Be With The BOP” was going to be more of a challenge that I had originally thought. At the very least, I decided I was going to have to look outside my discipline and went to check the call-out sheet for further instructions.
When I first got to the prison, I rather expected that I would be given a job. I think the sign that said Florence Federal Prison Labor Camp was my first clue. Of course, since I’m an American and am operating under the misconception that slavery was abolished some time ago, I didn’t expect to be paid 12¢ an hour for my labor, but I did expect to work at something. So, when I arrived and was recovering from the shock of actually being incarcerated, I started asking around about what that actually entailed. I was told by everyone, “It’s not bad, unless you get put into the ADX kitchen. That really sucks.”

Now, I’m familiar with acronym-rich environments, having worked in the public mental health system for many years. So the ADX moniker didn’t throw me particularly, except that I had no idea what it meant. I tried a few probing questions but was typically met with a quick glance over the shoulder followed by a whispered “I’ll tell you later.” I got the drift. The ADX was a bad place, perhaps the local equivalent of Hell. I knew I was already in Purgatory.
Thinking it was a place of some sort and while I awaited future enlightenment, I decided it must mean “Anyone who Did X”, with “X” being far too awful a deed to even contemplate. I wasn’t far off.

The ADX is the modern equivalent of Alcatraz, except landlocked. It is the most secure prison facility in America and perhaps the world, at least according to Guinness, the kind you read not the kind you drink. There are such celebrities there as Ted the “Unabomber” Kazinsky, Terry Nichols of Oklahoma City bombing repute and perhaps five hundred others of the presumed “worst of the worst.” Now, I’m sure that some of the folks there are truly people you wouldn’t want to meet in a less-structured setting, particularly if you worked for the government in any capacity. But I have also seen the Department of Injustice functioning in full flower, so I suspect there are others who possibly shouldn’t even be there, not that I wanted to try and sort them out without good background information. Even though it is a facility where each inmate exists in total isolation, usually for life, obviously there were reasons to be concerned about working in the ADX kitchen that seemed logical, since it suggested that the inmates were eating and, therefore, alive.

Later, that day, I was able to corner someone who was willing to be a bit more forthcoming.
“What’s so bad about working in the ADX kitchen? Is it
safe?”

“Oh, it’s safe. You don’t ever get anywhere near the
inmates. It’s just that it’s hard work and the COs treat you
like an animal.”

I ingested this tidbit of information and masticated on it
for a moment. So working in the most secure prison in America,
surrounded by, arguably, the most deadly collection of felons in
the land, was made distasteful not by any threat from the
inmates, but a threat from the cops who were supervising you.
This was not the first time I had experienced a cognitive
disconnect upon contemplating the realities of prison camp life
in contrast to the on-line advertisements.

“But they’re guards . . . and we’re, we’re campers for
Christ’s sake.”

The second the words flew out I could hear the depths of my
naiveté, now undoubtedly part of my future camp lore. “Did you
hear what that new guy said to me – the one who asked the warden
why he couldn’t have a word processor? He said the cops at the
ADX are guards and we’re campers. What a dufus.”

But he was polite

“No,” he corrected me gently, “they are overseers and you
are slave labor.”
That certainly put a new spin on things, and brought strains of “I’ve Got Plenty of Nothing” from *Porgy and Bess* to my ears. Wow. What a trip. Bill, the slave.

“How do I get out of it?” I may be a bit dense initially, but I learn fast.

“You can try to get a CO in another area to sign your worksheet showing that he wants to give you a job, and then give it to Jacobsen. He controls job assignments.”

Another piece of information. Someone actually controlled job assignments. I wondered if that meant they also had a Sheet Monitor who could have helped me with my prior problem.

Thanking my informant, I went on my way. It was too early in my prison development to realize that I should have at least given him a postage stamp, the local currency.

Now it may sound odd to you that there would be currency in a prison. But if you think about it, there has to be some way for people to track payments for the some two hundred small businesses that the inmates had established. If you are going to lock up enough people to essentially create small towns, the development of a system of economics is inevitable. There was no way for currency to get into the hands of inmates, except through smuggling. And it would have been one of the many disallowed items listed under the heading of “contraband” and subject to immediate confiscation if seen. But stamps were not
considered contraband, and could be purchased at the commissary for a set amount. They also could be purchased on the inmate market for a slightly different amount. And they could double as poker chips, or payment for services rendered, or for anything to which you could attach a value. If you could get enough stamps you could pay to have your boots shined, your laundry done, your cube cleaned, or for a cold soda at the end of your work shift, one that another inmate had purchased at commissary, then placed on ice for a slightly marked up price. I once had an inmate summarize it neatly for me. “Stamps,” he said, “are the currency; tobacco is the gold standard.” Ron and Rand Paul would have been proud.

So stamps flowed freely around the compound and were appropriate to use for tipping or just expressing gratitude, say for getting correct information. This leads me take another segue into the issue of information in the prison environment. One would think that if you are going to put someone in such a setting with about four or five hundred other guys it would be in everybody’s best interest to give that person some introductory information. In fact, simple sound administrative practice would suggest perhaps it would be wise to mail that information to the person prior to admission so that he could be at least somewhat prepared. The more I thought about it, that could have kept my son-in-law and me from getting lost while
driving there when I was self-reporting. We passed a sign that said “Honduras, left; Prison Camp, right.” After considerable thought, we turned right. But since they hadn’t sent me an address to go with my reporting data, we still got lost and had to call On-Star.

“This is On-Star.”

“Yes, can you tell us how to find the Café Florence?”

Long pause.

“There is no listing for Café Florence in Florence or the surrounding areas.”

“We meant the one at the Federal Prison Camp.”

Longer pause.

“By all means.”

Another long pause.

“You’re going in the wrong direction.”

Sounded like a good idea to me.

“Turn around, go back five miles to the intersection with Highway 63, turn right and it will be on your left after one-half a mile.”

“Thank you, On-Star.”

I reminded myself to corrupt their data base the next chance I got. I figured I could probably find someone at the camp who could show me how.

“Can we help you with anything else? Bail money, perhaps?”
She didn’t really say it, but Lord knows what she was thinking.

“No thanks, we’ll take it from here.”

If they had mailed me some information perhaps I could also have brought a mattress with me, or larger sheets. It would have added some color to the “Husband in a Box” still life. Instead, what they do is wait until you get there then give you a Handbook at your intake. You are then told that everything you need to know is in that book, so read it carefully. I generally take instructions well and did just that. It was quite illuminating. I found out all about parole, which hasn’t existed in the federal system since about 1987, and the various forms of “good time,” which also haven’t existed in any meaningful form since 1987, as well as a great deal of other information that has since been altered, amended, or just plain disallowed. That doesn’t count the stuff that is there but just ignored. All that went right along with the sign in the hallway detailing all the various personal articles I could have in my cubicle, including exactly how much of each kind of tobacco. The facility has been totally nonsmoking for a number of years, but that’s OK, it’s tough to change all those signs that are typed on eight by eleven sheets of paper. It probably does take years. But my favorite line in the Handbook was to be found in the section describing the use of TV rooms. There it clearly
stated that “unattended chairs will be confiscated and subject to disciplinary action.” (“Bad chair!”)

I hoped to witness that for my whole time there. I wondered if it would involve a whip.

Following the rules delineated in the Handbook, whenever I had a question about a camp rule, process, or procedure, I dutifully followed the chain of command and asked my counselor. I was generally directed back to the Handbook, which I was informed had “just been updated.” I admit, I found that comment puzzling in the light of the obsolete 1987 material that was still in it.

The alternative to the Handbook was the inmates. You certainly didn’t want to ask the staff, unless you had figured out who was “safe” to approach. That took years in some cases. Some were best treated like lowland gorillas with complete avoidance of eye-contact. With others, a simple “yes, Massa” was generally sufficient, but you still didn’t want to approach them unless there was no other alternative.

Now, in contrast, the inmates were incredibly helpful, at least in my experience. I had never met a more mutually supportive and helpful group of guys in my life. But, then, I had never been locked up with five hundred men who share a common detestation of authority, at least the local version of it. In my experience, I found just about everyone helpful in
the extreme. People went out of their way to answer your questions, explain how things really worked and give you any information that you needed to survive the silliness of it all. In fact, the inmate rumor mill was also one of the most active institutions on this or, I suspect, any planet. The combination of being generally out of the real information loop and having one’s life and well-being totally dependent upon that information tended to create an endless stream of rumors, with varying levels of fact at their heart. This could have been anything from legislation that is pending on the federal level to which piece of one’s cubicle was about to be removed at the whim of the COs. We called it “inmate.com” and learned to approach the information with about the same degree of faith one should give to the internet. It was like a sewing bee in a small town. Perhaps that’s why the crocheting and beading classes offered through the rec department were so popular.

There was one inmate who served as an inadvertent test of the different information systems. When he first joined us he refused to interact with anyone, despite the best efforts of a number of people who approached him. Everyone had some understanding of just how difficult those first few days could be and many tried to go out of their way to offer information to the newbies. And Lord knows Martha Stewart Living was potentially a better source than the Handbook. But this guy was
having none of it. He just sat on his bunk day after day, looking completely scared and miserable, and refused to talk to anyone. Then something happened that changed everything for him. His case manager asked him to show an even newer inmate around the compound, but when he took the guy in one direction, one of the COs ended up berating and threatening him for doing exactly what the first guy had instructed. For no good reason, he was being threatened with a trip to the hole before he even knew what the hole was. Being set up like that broke the dam and he decided to talk about it to his bunkie. As it turned out, his attorney had strongly instructed him to “trust none of the inmates and only trust the COs.” “Remember,” his attorney had said, “only the COs are your friends.” Well, it had taken him about a week to realize that his attorney had it dead backwards. He had learned quickly that in this setting the inmates were just your typical collection of people in terms of their personal ethics and it was the COs who couldn’t be trusted, at all. After that, he was one of the friendliest guys around, particular to the guys who were new on the compound.

So, based on the information I had gleaned from the most reliable available source about how to avoid the ADX kitchen, I set about making that occur.

Now I have a lot of education. That doesn’t mean that I always use it wisely, but it certainly exists there if I should
choose to consult it. I also have about twenty years of intermittent experience as a contract professor, primarily of graduate students. When I saw that there was an active and vigorous education department in the camp, it sounded like a perfect fit. So, I approached the lady who ran that program. I typed up a brief summary of my background, about eight times in order to correct all the typos. The warden just didn’t seem inclined to bend on that “no word processor” thing. I gave it to her with a “Job Request Form.” In what was one of the few moments of CO lucidity I experienced while I was there, she actually agreed with me and signed the form. Thinking I had solved the “Assignment to Hell” problem, I quickly ran that form to Mr. Jacobsen. I then started putting time into the Library as I awaited what I thought was sure to be notification of my assignment to the Education Department. So, I kept my eye closely attached to the call-out sheet.

The next day, I saw my name, right next to an entry that said, “ADX Gate Pass.” I had no idea what that meant. It could have been an order to report somewhere, but there was no time indicated. So I did what I’d been told. I consulted my handy Handbook. Nowhere was “ADX Gate pass” or “Gate pass” listed. Failing in that, I turned to my chain of administrative command and approached my Counselor. He didn’t know what it meant either, nor did he seem particularly curious about it. He
muttered something about “some idiot who had been asking around about sheet extenders” and wandered off. So I turned to the inmate hot line. Oddly, that was unproductive as well. I couldn’t even generate a good rumor from that source. I was told everything from: it means nothing to maybe you better report to the ADX Gate. Since that was off-compound and about a half a mile away, I filed the latter under my rapidly growing list labeled “bad advice.” So I kept watching the “call-out” sheet, but nothing happened. A week went by. There was no assignment to education; no sign of movement in any direction.

Then it came.

Right next to my name it said “Job Assignment – ADX FS-I.” Again, I asked around thinking that FS could mean any of a number of things: “Front Security,” or “Federal Sanctuary,” and “Fine Shoes” all sprung to mind. This time there was an answer from the hotline.

“You’re screwed. That’s food service, first shift. You’re going to the ADX kitchen.”

Well, at least I knew. They say that knowing about a bad thing is better than the experience of anticipating it. But the last time I had tried to use that logic was with respect to my incarceration and that hadn’t turned out all that well.

“What’s the first shift?”

“4 a.m. to 12 a.m.”
That sounded early. I thought about it some more. That sounded really early.

“So what do I do?”

“Beats me.”

You know, it’s interesting, in most jobs there is a person who actually orients you as to where to go and what to expect. My entire orientation was apparently going to be the entry on this call-out sheet. Again, I asked around, and illumination was slow in coming. But I found someone who looked like he’d been around a while.

“You just show up in your ‘greens’ at the ‘bubble’ between 3:30 and 4 a.m.”

“OK. I don’t have an alarm clock or a watch. How do I know when to get up?”

“That’s your problem.”

That seemed obvious to me. This whole damn mess was clearly my problem, but that wasn’t getting me closer to meeting this particular requirement.

“Do they have a wakeup call service at the desk?”

This seemed a reasonable question to me, given the circumstances. I could tell from the look that I was the only one who thought it was reasonable.

“There’s probably someone in your pod who has to get up early so you can listen for him.”
“Where’s the bubble?”

I had moved into three-stamp territory.

“It’s that thing up there that looks like a bubble.”

Well, nothing on the compound looked like a bubble to me, but I thought that perhaps I should look around a bit for bubble-like structures. Besides, I had worn out this gentleman’s patience and he wanted to go alphabetize his contraband.

“Thanks.”

It occurred to me that I was going to need to buy an alarm clock at the Commissary, lest I discover the actual nature of the compound wake-up call system which could easily involve lights and sirens. I discovered later that it actually involved kicked beds and a lot of yelling, presumably designed to wake up everyone with fifty feet of the offender. I wandered over to the commissary, keeping alert for any bubbles that might appear and looked on a commissary sheet. Lo and behold, they sold alarm clocks. Now that was a surprise. At $14.00 per inmate, that meant that there was $9,000 of potential revenue represented by that one item alone at any given time on the compound. I did some more math. At 12¢ an hour that was about one hundred and twenty hours of work required to buy the alarm clock. But somehow, I didn’t think I was going to get to wait to work for those hundred and twenty hours before I was expected
to show up on time. One of the many mysteries of my new
environment.

Try as I might I could find little other preparatory
information and reflexively reached for my cell phone to call
411. But alas, my cell was now a feature of the “Husband-in a
Box” still life. In fact, I was to learn that cell phones were
one of the most dangerous things that an inmate could possess.
The BOP has a zero-tolerance policy about cell phones and was
always trying to find the 50 or so of them that existed on the
compound at any given time. While I never actually saw one
during my time there, I certainly heard many one-sided
conversations, and inmates were constantly being caught with
them. Perhaps the saddest was the guy who fell asleep while
talking to his girlfriend and during a count was found with the
phone on his chest as he lay there snoring. Given the degree to
which the cell phone has penetrated modern culture, I could only
imagine how difficult it was for the younger inmates in
particular to avoid the lure. And searching for them certainly
provided the COs with much-needed diversion.

But for me it was simply time to bite the bullet,
metaphorically, since bullets were clearly not considered an
approved inmate personal item, and figure out how to show up for
work.

So I did.
I don’t know when you last got up at 3:30 a.m. to go to your job. Perhaps you do it every day. By nature and practice, I am not someone who sleeps late into the morning, but 3:30 doesn’t actually seem like morning. It’s night. When the other guy’s alarm in the pod went off, signifying that it was time for both of us to wake up, it certainly looked and felt like night.

My first clue was that it was dark. My second is that it was very cold, given that it was Colorado and it was winter.

I rose and dressed rapidly, trying only to slam into my metal locker four or five times, lest I accidentally wake someone up. I was still pretty new and didn’t yet know exactly who it was safe to wake and who might revert to pre-camp behavior if abrasively aroused. I was about fifteen degrees outside, so I put on as many layers of clothes as I could. I had yet to make it to commissary, so that was pretty limited – a T-shirt, a thin short-sleeve shirt, and a coat that wouldn’t close correctly. I then set off to see if the ‘bubble’ was perhaps easier to find in the complete dark than it had been during the daytime.

I pushed open the door to the unit and was slapped by a brisk wind that made the wind-chill factor about five below. That was OK; at least it blew my coat shut as I headed into it. I saw a few other campers trundling along the walkways of the “compound.” A side note on language: Usually ‘camps’ aren’t
called compounds unless they are prisoner of war camps, and in that case, we all know that the language is being used purposely so that the public will not think that prisoners are being abused. Somehow, I doubted that the web-site advertising the Florence Camp called it a compound. But ‘compound’ it was, and presumably still is.

As I looked at the others, all seemed to be moving in a unified direction, toward the front lobby of the camp. I still didn’t see a bubble hanging over the lobby, but neither did I see anyone else heading in any other direction. I decided to take a flier and followed the crowd.

About three of us went through the door at the same time. As luck would have it, I was first and had no idea what to do. I figured if I went straight through, which would take me out to the parking lot, that would be a bad idea. The door to the left was apparently locked and it was very dark behind it. To the right was a large open double-door leading into a seating area. That looked like it had promise, so I turned right. I got about six feet before I heard “YOU!” barked out behind me. Somehow, I knew that this meant me.

I turned and saw that there was a glass receiving area with an office behind it. I hadn’t paid attention to it because the light was off, but as I looked, I could see the glow from someone’s cigarette in the darkness. The other two guys were
milling off to the side, clearly aware of what they were doing, although it was incomprehensible to me. That was a frequent experience for me at the camp. I started to walk toward the red glow in the darkness. It occurred to me that this was a federal facility and that whoever was smoking in there was breaking the law. I got closer and realized that it was one of the COs. Figures. This was not an environment where role-modeling was given much credence, just power.

I saw that there was a metal trough at the bottom of the glass, presumably so inmates could pass cigarettes freely to the CO on the other side. I filed that away in the category of “provisional information --- among inmates, its stamps; with the COs it’s cigarettes.”

“What’s your name?”

Clearly the emphysema was not too advanced; he could talk.

“Crabbe.”

At this point I should point out that my name is pronounced as if it did not have the “e.” That has proved baffling to many people over the course of my life and has led to much mutilation during attempts at pronunciation. Most, of course, settle for something like crabby, although, crabble, crappe, and crabber have occurred from time to time. The most creative was “grable” which took me a while to figure out, at least until the professor got to the end of calling roll and I realized that
“grable” had come in the Cs. Nor do we siblings know why it is “Crabbe” with an “e.” My father added it for reasons that have always been something of a family mystery. He was either annoyed with his father or trying to be like Buster Crabbe of the movies. To top it off, he never actually changed it, so that when he got to the end of his life, the nursing home reverted it to “Crabb.” But our legal names are Crabbe and the rest of us continue to say “Crabbe – C..R..A..B..B..E” fairly regularly sheerly out of habit.

“What’s your name?”

“Crabbe.”

“What?”

“Crabbe.”

The cigarette flared, and his voice got a bit more strident.

“WHAT?”


That usually takes care of any confusion, but not this time. This was a classic example of trying to solve the wrong problem.

“Lean down.”

This seemed like a really weird request, given the circumstances. I was reporting for work in a kitchen, not paying a call on an emperor. Still, I try to be accommodating
to most things, particularly in new situations, so I said again, “Crabbe,” but this time bowing my head slightly.

“Lean down so I can hear you.”

That was a bit more information so I did a quick reevaluation of the problem. I had been thinking that, like most people, he simply couldn’t believe that someone could be named “Crabbe,” but I was wrong, he simply couldn’t hear me.

Now that I thought about it, it occurred to me that someone had forgotten to put one of those metal speaking thingees in the window of the main office. Nor did the window open. Clearly, security had overridden all other concerns. Having some irate outsider attempt to climb through the metal speaking thingee probably was a threat to be considered. So the option was to bend down and try to bellow through the metal trough. So I did.

I bent down and yelled, enunciating clearly, “CRABBE!”

“What?”

Now I was a bit stumped. By this time he had a sheet in front of him, from which he had to periodically brush off the ashes, and was looking at a list of names. Presumably, one of them was “Crabbe.”

There seemed to be only one way through this, unless I was going to write my name on a paper and hold it up to the window. But I didn’t have paper or a pencil, and they don’t leave such things lying around, as they are clearly security items. I
pressed my mouth to the opening on the outside of the trough, having to kneel in the process, trying not to think of what had been there before me and repressing a host of other images. It felt a little like confession.

“CRABBE! C! .. R! .. A! .. B! .. B! .. E!”

The cigarette burned his fingers and he dropped it. But that was OK; he had another one lit before the smoke from the burning paper hit the ceiling.

Perhaps it was the light from his lighter that did it.

“Here you are,” he said.

Actually, I wasn’t. I was over on the other side, but it didn’t seem like a good time to split hairs. He waived vaguely in the direction of the chairs, or perhaps he was just moving the smoke away from his face. I took the hint, went in, and sat.

The other two guys who had entered the bubble with me had gone off in a different direction and for the first few minutes I was all alone in the room, but soon other inmates began to filter in. These were not people I had met yet and I didn’t really know the protocol of making introductions. Besides, all of them looked about as awake as I felt, which was not very. One by one they genuflected in front of the smoking priest, barking their names into the metal confessional plate. Then each wandered into the room and took a seat.
I don’t know if you have ever noticed how people tend to fill up an empty room. Perhaps it is particularly a male thing, but each person heads for an unoccupied section where he can claim at least some measure of personal space. Then, as the crowd increases, those spaces shrink. But men will never sit right next to each other if there is any other alternative. Nor do men tend to talk to other men that they don’t know. It makes one wonder how they ever meet anyone for the first time.

So each guy walked in, establishing dominance of his own little island and sat quietly, waiting for something. As I thought about it, it seemed odd that there was so little conversation, since these were guys who had been working together for some time. Nor could I figure out exactly what we were waiting for. I thought perhaps there would be some sort of sign, like an eerie animal encounter, the kind of thing that would have caused the initiation of some kind of tribal ceremony. But nothing of the sort occurred, or perhaps it did. One of the original two guys reemerged, barked his name into the trough, then turned towards us and yelled “LOAD UP!”

I was sure he didn’t mean “lock and load” but wasn’t sure what he actually did mean. Everyone immediately stood up and wandered back out of the room toward the front door. I could now see that there was a circa 1990 bus sitting at the curb,
dieseling quietly. We headed toward that. My journey to the ADX was about to begin.

Many of the inmates in federal camps are young guys who either took the wrong drugs or sold the wrong drugs or made the wrong drugs. By the “wrong” drugs, I mean those that are not manufactured and distributed by companies that are either largely owned or controlled by our major political figures. The government abhors the competition and has responded at various times throughout our history by incarcerating its competitors. About eighty percent of the inmates in our camp fell into that category. For what it’s worth, the rest seem to be the so-called “white-collar” guys, many of whom were competing with other arms of government. Anyway, the young like noise. I think that is a biological given. The more noise the better. Nor does it matter when that noise occurs, or even if it’s particularly organized. It simply needs to be noisy. Now, riding a bus at 4:00 a.m. to a slave labor assignment is onerous enough to someone who is closer to being elderly than young. It moves to another level entirely when that is done to the accompaniment of very loud, only marginally organized music. But at least the inmates weren’t singing “Kumbaya.”

This actually is an area where I witnessed just about the highest level of tension that existed in the camp. There were only a limited number of jobs that the many near-elderly and
elderly inmates could perform, particularly since Celebrex is not on the approved medication list. One of these jobs is bus driver. That means that the driver may or may not have been someone who was sympathetic to the noise needs of the young, probably partly determined by his number of grandchildren. I watched one such driver struggle mightily with this issue.

“Tunes!” was the demand upon the cessation of loading. Some of us who would really have preferred to ride in silence braced ourselves for the onslaught. But this driver had other ideas. The unmistakable strains of Mozart wafted softly over the air. There was a brief moment of stunned silence. I think they thought he was kidding.

“No, man! Tunes!”

The Mozart was turned up a notch. By now they realized that there was a “failure to communicate” in process.

There was some more organized complaining that rose in volume. Mozart lends himself to quiet contemplation most of the time, not building inmate insurrections.

“Jesus, man, what kind of candy-ass bullshit is this?”

You know you can mess with a lot of things when you are hassling inmates, particularly if you are a guard and do it for a living, but there is a sacred quality to music. Just because hip-hop or Guns and Roses doesn’t sound contemplative to one ear
doesn’t mean that it doesn’t carry near-religious significance to another. The driver was about to get an education.

The other voices joined in.

“Yeah, dog, this stuff sucks!”

“89.3 ...”

“103.5 ...”

There were not exactly hints.

There was a brief moment of static and low cheer started, and then dried up instantly when what was unmistakably a Christian music station began to grace the airwaves.

“You gotta be shittin’ me,” was the stunned comment from behind me.

The original voice started singing strangely contrapuntal hosannas; intermixed with what I thought might be farting sounds. The situation was clearly deteriorating rapidly.

Fortunately for all, the entire bus ride took only about three minutes, even at the federally-mandated twenty-five mile-per-hour rate. Before there was any removing and throwing of seats, we pulled up to the ADX gate.

Now I don’t know if you have ever seen the rear entry to a maximum security federal prison, but it is a sight that makes an impression. Directly in front of us was this twenty foot high chain-link fence, topped with several rows of concertina wire. On a later occasion a different bus driver, proving that he was
a misplaced tour guide, had regaled us with the story of the development of concertina wire and the fortune it had brought to the inventor’s widow. I think he was hoping to meet her upon release. He certainly seemed to be up on the family. But on this occasion, I was simply struck by the purely inhumane impression suggested by the arrangement.

Concertina wire looks like someone strung razor blades together on a barbed-wire base. It is typically strung in a looping fashion that reminded me of one of the basic screen-savers on a computer windows platform. It doesn’t just look formidable to navigate, it looks frickin’ sadistic. And there must have been about two miles of it crammed into the two hundred feet of fencing that I could see. In the main sections it was stacked two and three layers deep. Christ may have been able to walk on water, but he would have thought twice about venturing out onto this stuff.

Then, there were the guard towers. They must have been designed by a refugee of the sixties who had ingested a few too many mushrooms, because they looked like ninety-foot concrete toadstools, with windows going all around the caps. Presumably there was a human being inside that tower, although the windows were dark and impenetrable to questing eyes. I tamped down the phallic symbolism that sprang to mind, complete with CO’s and their guns.
When the bus stopped, we didn’t immediately get off. Instead, we sat and watched as the shift before us slowly worked their way through the various layers of security with which I was to become altogether too acquainted. It might have been my imagination, but the Christian music had taken on a vaguely satanic tone.

We disembarked. I followed the crowd as we formed a line facing the wire-laden fence in front of us. Since it was quite cold and I was decidedly underdressed, I tried to move around a bit to keep warm. I figured it would be bad form to die on my first day before I actually got to work. I stepped back and forth several times, shaking my arms and hugging myself, mostly because I couldn’t stop shaking anyway and there wasn’t anyone else present that I was interested in having hug me.

“You probably shouldn’t step over that line.”

This was delivered in a quiet fashion by one of my fellow workers.

He tossed his head in the direction of the guard tower.

“If you’re across the yellow line, he has permission to shoot you.”

Oh.

I looked for the line, which I could barely make out, as it was still quite dark and the line was mostly worn off, then jumped quickly back across it. This is the kind of information
that would have probably been good to include in the nonexistent job orientation, or perhaps in the Handbook, under the heading “Behaviors to Engage in When Contemplating Suicide.”

One of the things I’ve figured out is that prison camp is a very bad place to be a space cadet. I am notorious in my family for being remarkably unobservant.

“Honey, when did we get that huge dog run out there?”

“Oh, about two months ago. Right after we got all the dogs.”

Experiences like that are fairly common for me on the ranchero where we live. I am reminded of one of my dating experiences with my wife, the kind of thing that occurs when you are beginning to define the parameters of your future relationship. I was watching a basketball game at her house, which was a farmhouse out in the country. I tend to get a little absorbed when watching basketball, like the time I missed the 4.2 earthquake. Cheryl walked by saying something like “I wonder who just turned into the driveway.” It didn’t register exactly, although here yet another explanation is in order.

My mother talked incessantly. She was known to do crossword puzzles out loud by herself in another room. You simply could not attend to everything she said without going stark raving mad. At the same time, she was my mother and I found it was not wise to ignore her. So I developed a tape-
delay system for mother-speech. I would ignore most of what she said, putting my brain on alert for the sound of a question. Upon hearing that particular inflection, I would immediately replay the last several sentences of her speech that I had been semi-consciously recording, so that I had a fighting chance of answering. This worked very well with my mother for my entire life. It is a classic example of how some childhood survival skills break down when applied generally to women.

"I guess I’ll just go outside in the dark and see who it is."

This still didn’t register, since Jordan was clearly in the middle of one of his unbelievable offensive runs.

"Of course, I’ll probably be raped and murdered, but do you suppose anyone will ever know?"

That kicked off the tape delay mechanism, and I replayed the whole line of patter with a sinking feeling. I almost, but not quite, beat her to the back door.

While such skills and adaptive styles may occasionally work on the outside, in the prison environment you are expected to attend to a myriad of rules and environmental cues. Many make no sense to anyone but Lewis Carroll, and others change seemingly from hour to hour. Still others are the kind that you get one shot at, with no advance warning. None are truly delineated in what I now internally named the Up-To-Date/Out-Of-
It is simply not a place for the unobservant to be preoccupied. That means that about ninety percent of the time I was out of place.

Having so far avoided being shot before reporting to work, I took my place in line. There ensued this very bizarre ritual that I was to repeat several times each day for the next three months. Two guards took their positions, preparing to do the ubiquitous pat-down. At first, I thought maybe they were going to toss us back and forth in some strange variant of a sideways “trust-drop,” that obnoxious exercise that at one time seemed to dominate human services retreats. But, no, they were just doing yet another pat-down. Meanwhile, another guard hung on the inside of the looming fence with a series of cards in his hand. He read a name, usually in semi-recognizable form, and the indicated inmate was expected to step briskly forward shouting out his registration number. I guess this was to verify that someone else hadn’t decided to blow a morning by dropping in on the ADX for a visit.

Now, there are many things in prison that are designed to dehumanize you. Chief among these is the attempt to reduce you to a number. Once I had begun to recognize some of these tactics I made an internal decision to resist the most obvious ones. Chiefly, I had decided that I would not memorize my number and had been very successful in maintaining that lack of
awareness. So, when my turn came and I heard “Crabby” I reached in my pocket for my handy-dandy plasticized ID card, pulled it out, and read my number as I briskly strode forward, admittedly shooting a quick glance up at the guard tower looking for the tell-tale flash of a scope. Nobody said anything about my memory issues - that time.

I walked to where the guard was performing his pat downs and turned to assume “the position.” For this purpose we were allowed to stay upright and dressed, presumably because they weren’t interested in either the existence of hemorrhoids or tonsils. But we were expected to do “the airplane” as it was affectionately known. When I was a child “doing the airplane” meant putting my arms out and making vroom-vroom noises as I ran semi-maniacally about the room, to the great vexation of my parents and older brother. Here, it was treated much more seriously. I was to present my back to the guard (presumably so that I couldn’t see him giving me instructions), with my legs spread and my arms extended. If I had positioned myself properly he would run his hands up and down my legs and arms, trying to uncover my hidden cache of weapons. If he was feeling particularly testy he might vary the leg part by seeing if he could convert me from a baritone to a soprano. Nor was this activity particularly confined to men, as there were women guards who also performed these pat downs. My reaction to that
is best described as following a quadratic curve. At first, I was much too discombobulated by the whole prison environment and experience to react at all. After a while, it seemed slightly titillating. Then, after one had interacted with these same women in the guard persona, it was once again aversive.

Once I had been airplaned and searched I was told to stand over to the side. One by one each of the arriving kitchen crew was subjected to this same procedure. As a growing freezing group we waited for the next step in the entry process. There was a wave to the tower and the chain link fence gate clicked open. We walked through and headed over to a little shack-like area where we were again amassed. Although the guards were inside this structure, where we could hear that the discussion of fantasy football seemed to be going on hot and heavy, we were outside. It was cold enough that we really didn’t give a rat’s ass about fantasy teams. So, we all stomped in circles, trying to keep our blood moving, ever mindful of a second faded yellow line that was slowly being illuminated by the growing light. Finally, one guy had had enough.

“Take Brady, for Christ sakes. He’s the most consistent guy out there.”

There was a pause in the debate inside the building. I think they had forgotten about the seventeen inmates who were milling about eight feet away. Still, the response was not
immediate. Being shot from the tower was starting to look more attractive.

They finally decided to pay attention to the next step in the process. This time the voice called our names out from inside the building. But we were outside. And again, there was no metal speaky thingee in sight. Each name drifted straight out the door and into the night, not reaching anyone’s ears. Nor did they like it when you didn’t respond to your name being called. But inmates are resourceful, having to confront and solve an endless series of such catch-22s. One guy positioned himself by the door and started relaying names. It was kind of like the bucket brigade approach to putting out a fire.

“Jones, Jones, . . . Jones . . .”

“Tyler, Tyler, . . . Tyler . . .”

“Hernandez, Hernandez, . . . Hernandez”

It was like an eerie echo, ricocheting off the canyon walls of concertina wire.

This time, the expected response was slightly different. Each summoned inmate was required to go into the building, saying his number, of course, and then go through what looked like an airport metal detector.

There was a problem. This was the BOP, not Denver International. This was an organization that probably thought that Windows 98 was an up-to-date software platform. The idea
that they could possibly have a properly calibrated metal
detector and keep it calibrated seems ludicrous to those who
have watched them operate. And to be sure, this thing went off
about forty percent of the time as the inmates went through it.
If the interior surface was brushed, if someone had on one of
the coats that had a plastic zipper instead of Velcro (yes, plastic) --- it just seemed to go off according to its own whim.
Inmates took to removing their coats and basically performing a
quasi strip search, just trying to get through this metal
detector so that they could get out of the cold. And you only
got three tries. If you set the thing off three straight times
there was a mandatory full strip search. This added yet another
decidedly odd variable to the concept of reporting for work.

Actually, this whole thing had one truly bizarre component.
One of the inmates on my shift had been in a major motorcycle
accident and as a result, had a large titanium plate in his leg.
The first time he went through this detector he divulged this to
the guards. Their response:

“OK,” and they waived him through. This was repeated each
of the about a hundred and fifty times I saw him go through this
machine, both going to and coming from work. Yet with everyone
else, it was treated as an issue of great significance. This
guy could have smuggled an entire cell out of the ADX if he had
just cut it into small enough pieces. A forgotten packet of coffee would have sent the rest of us to the hole. Go figure.

This was also the location of one of the most immature exchanges I had while an inmate. One morning, as I was taking my spin through the metal detector, I decided to correct the guard who had called me “Crabby.”

“Crab,” said I, ignoring the “e” in my pronunciation and thinking that would take care of it, as it usually did. However, I had encountered a comedian.

“I think I’ll just call you Crabby,” was his reply.

Now, with a name like mine even kids didn’t bother to make fun of me – it was too easy. It takes adults to do that, and usually a particular type of adult – those who have limited imaginations and who occupy positions of power. Come to think of it, that pretty well described most of the authority structure of my new world.

Just a note, it is really good idea to avoid going to prison when you are old. By the time a person has knocked around this planet for a lot of years, you develop a certain perspective. Try as they might, the young simply don’t have it. That’s probably why most sane societies accord a modicum of automatic respect to the aged. But the mean age of the COs in my new world was about 30. To be sure, there were a few burned out lifer COs, but they were the exception, not the rule. More
typically, I found myself confronted by an endless series of marginally mature young adults who had been given far more power than they had the wisdom to wield. It made for many trying moments, and calling them “Sonny” was usually considered bad form. So you just learned to ignore them as much as possible, which was a challenge.

By now, we had been patted down and had our fillings catalogued, but we weren’t yet in the ADX proper. Once again, we gathered outside the cubicle, albeit this time on the other side and shivered and stomped as we waited.

“I’m telling you it’s Manning. Just look at his numbers.”
“Brady’s - steady. Manning can’t play outside.”
“What about Eli?”
“Give me a break - he’s nothing without Barber.”

At this point, I don’t think any of us cared about much of anything other than getting inside the kitchen, where presumably, it was warm. But it was still about a hundred feet, one fence and a locked door away.

Apparently even immature, semi-sadistic prison guards tire of discussing fantasy football teams. So they eventually emerged from their room and led a freezing, bedraggled group of inmates towards the next gate. It clicked open and we headed across the inner courtyard to the door to the kitchen. We dumped our coats in the foyer (actually another locked room) and
finally bolted into the kitchen. I think this was their way of trying to motivate us. After twenty minutes of standing stomping and milling in fifteen-degree weather, getting to work actually seemed like an attractive option. But then, it was my first day. I was to learn better.

MEDICINE – BOP STYLE

Before reporting to prison, I had several working fantasies. One of the simplest was that this would prove to be a period of time where I could get any lingering medical problems fully diagnosed and resolved. The pressures of everyday life tend to keep me from actually attending to such things on a consistent basis, as does the fact that I actually have to pay for my own health insurance and am, thus,
chronically underinsured. I figured as long as they were going to take away my freedom for a bogus crime, while I was there I could at least get care that would be on the same level as other governmental employees, that is, much better than virtually all other Americans. That particular fantasy didn’t just die; it was crushed, mangled and dismembered in a lingering and horrific death.

My first clue came from a new acquaintance, one of the very dangerous accountants that the federal prosecutors had thought it was important to lock away. As an aside, they had threatened him with seventeen years so that he would be terrified enough to plead guilty and take three. Not surprisingly, he has told me he doesn’t want to be an accountant anymore, particularly since he can’t figure out what he did that was illegal in the first place. But, then, he was convicted of conspiracy, something that doesn’t require that you do anything – you are accused of thinking about it and are not able to prove that you didn’t think about it. In fact, I later discovered that one of my new compatriots had been imprisoned for allegedly engaging in a conspiracy with himself, one that even the prosecutors agreed didn’t result in an act. In essence, his was allegedly a solo thought crime. Such is the Orwellian nature of our current legal system.
Anyway, this dangerous accountant had a heart condition. No one was really sure what it was, but the upshot was that he would occasionally slip into heart fibrillation with no apparent trigger. After many years his external physician had figured out that once triggered, a PRN dose of Ativan interrupted the cycle and returned his heart to normal rhythm. But there was a problem – the BOP doesn’t allow anyone to take benzodiazepines (minor tranquilizers like Ativan) for any reason. They are considered drugs of abuse and none are allowed, even to fifty-plus year old accountants with prescriptions. I subsequently found out that their stance on this was fairly long-standing, and not without the occasional complication. Just prior to my admission, a gentleman had been admitted on heart medication that was immediately discontinued. He went into arrest and had to be paddled, or so the story goes. But with my new acquaintance, the issue was less immediately dire, although no less potentially problematic. He had a legitimate concern that without his medication, he might defib right into a sick call, thus depriving the BOP of his labor. So rather than put him on an anti-anxiety drug, they decided instead to give him a generic anti-depressant that had some impact on anxiety. The problem was that particular medication only works if taken daily and is associated with a variety of side-effects. Of course, he began to develop these, which included an inability to urinate. If
you are reading this and are a male over fifty-five or so, I’m sure you can identify. You have reached that completely unanticipated, and equally undesirable, point of life where successfully initiating urination can be a cause for celebration. Having a prescribed medication make that even harder is something truly to be avoided. But that was his situation and his system was getting strained by the retention of urine, threatening to make him toxic, all in order to avoid him taking a medication with proven effectiveness for his condition. This went on for months. He remained alive, although increasingly bilious, but eventually had to discontinue the medication, putting him back to square one. As with many things in the BOP, nothing was ever resolved, and his choice remained to alternate between briefly terrifying untreated heart palpitations and potentially disorienting urinary blockage.

Here’s another example of what it’s like when one tries to get care in the BOP system. One guy ended up needing open heart surgery which, mercifully, was performed in a real hospital outside of the camp clinic. But when he returned some four days later the inmates realized no one had arranged for him to get his meals delivered to his cubicle as he convalesced. So the inmates took care of it, led by one who happened to be an emergency nurse in the real world. As he convalesced, his normally dry sense of humor began to reassert itself. At first
this was limited to offers that for two stamps we could bend down and listen to his ribcage creak. But this became less humorous when it was discovered that they had put him back together incorrectly and he was beginning to sound like a rusting Tin Woodman. After again getting him properly diagnosed off-site, he had to undergo another surgery that cost him his breastbone. From that point, creaking wasn’t the attraction, and trying not to bump his chest into any sharp objects seemed to occupy a lot of his attention.

One of my favorite BOP medicine incidents involved a conversation I overheard behind me one day as I was walking to my housing unit. The guy was talking about his recent trip to the dentist. You see, the dental plan for inmates is simple; if you tell them it hurts, they pull it. They have apparently never heard of amalgam or fillings. So no one goes to the dentist unless it becomes unavoidable, or they are delirious from taking the wrong medication and lose track. This guy had apparently skipped that part of the orientation.

“That hurt like a mother,” he commented to his buddy who was walking with him.

“What’d he do?”

“He pulled it. Then he held it up and said, ‘you know, it doesn’t look like there’s anything wrong with this one. Must have pulled the wrong tooth.’
“That bites,” his friend opined.

No shit, or not anymore, depending on how you look at it.

And then there was the guy who had been incarcerated long enough that almost all his teeth were gone. He finally decided to gum to bullet, so to speak, and have the survivors pulled in favor of using dentures that he was promised would be provided in short order. The teeth were pulled, but then the story shifted and it was going to take closer to four months for the dentures to arrive, leaving him having to triage his meals into “soft” and “softer” categories. He knew better than to complain, but did mention the situation to his Case Manager. The empathy was immediate, and telling.

“You’ve been down a long time,” his Case Manager observed, “I’m surprised you fell for that.”

That’s one way of looking at it.

The BOP has one major medical intervention strategy that works for all conditions. It’s called the Ibuprofen Shuffle. It doesn’t matter if your leg has been cut off on one of the seventy-one most recent accident-free days, or if you are getting an eye transplant. Take Ibuprofen and put in a cop-out. Now a cop-out is a form you fill out when you want to see the physician’s assistant, since there is usually no fully fledged doctor available. You put in this form, and then wait to see
if your name appears on a call-out sheet. It doesn’t. So after you wait for a week or two, you put in another one. Typically it still doesn’t appear. In fact, the general rule of thumb was that it took about five such cop-out forms to actually generate an appointment, although an earlier one or two might get scheduled and then cancelled along the way. You had to be patient to be a patient. The place was very literal.

At one point, I decided that maybe I should see the PA and at least get my records updated from the outside. So I put in a cop-out. About a month later, after I had put in two more, my name appeared on the list. This was a good thing, I thought. I had beaten the odds by about two cop-outs. So I went to my appointment. It got cancelled. About two weeks later it was rescheduled and I thought I was still ahead of the curve so I went back. Now you probably think that waiting for forty-five minutes to see your family doctor is annoying, try showing up for your BOP PA appointment. My call-out was for nine a.m. At eleven a.m. when I was still sitting there with about three other guys in front of me, I was told to go to lunch and then come back. This, I did. Then, the PA left, telling us he would see us later. He was last seen heading east from somewhere in Missouri.

Back to the drawing board. Another cop-out, another call-out and I was back. This time, I showed up an hour early,
because I had observed the time before that you simply put your name on a list upon arrival, so the actual time of your appointment was irrelevant. It was essentially first come, first serve. Again, I waited. Again, after a couple of hours I was sent to lunch. The bench in the waiting area was made of wrought iron, with no cushions, I think primarily in order to create hemorrhoids, because they can treat those with free, outdated tubes of Preparation H. I sat. I read. Finally, I was summoned inside.

I had had one previous encounter with the PA, which occurred at my intake. On that occasion he was clearly attempting to learn the ins and outs of his new computer software program. This was proving to be a challenge, as he put all my notes in the wrong guy’s file. This wasn’t a big problem because the paper version of that guy’s file was opened on the desk in front of me so it was easy for me to compare the entries and correct him. I made a mental note about confidentiality and the BOP’s approach to HIPAA laws as I did so.

The PA seemed like a nice enough fellow, once he got oriented. I just wasn’t sure he was competent. In fact, I was pretty sure that he wasn’t competent. In fact, I’m purposely being generous.

So at this second appointment I prepared to tell him the summary issues that I wished to update in my file. I had a
secondary agenda. I had this very large and frightening looking thing growing on the side of my big toe, presumably as a protest against my chronically ill-fitting boots. I had tried naming it, working under the premise that naming a thing is the first step to gaining power over it. But it wasn’t working. If it got much larger, I was going to have to ascend it and plant a flag on the summit.

I started to speak but he cut me off.

“Take off your shirt.”

This wasn’t of the same ilk as bend over and spread them, but it seemed equally irrelevant.

I almost said, “Why?” But I had already learned that this word needs to be excised from one’s vocabulary upon entry to camp life. The reasons typically aren’t forthcoming and when they are, they are mystifying.

He saved me from the query.

“We need to do your EKG.”

Thinking he had somehow misunderstood what I had a written on my cop-out sheet, I said, “I’m here to update my records, not for treatment per se. Did you see the medical summary I attached to my cop-out?”

“You put in a cop-out?”
I admit this threw me a bit. At my last count, I had put in four, two complete with a medical summary and copies of my medical records that my wife had sent me from the outside.

“Several,” I replied, trying not to sound accusatory.

“There’s no reason to put in more than one,” he said, sounding mildly irked.

Actually, I was beginning to think there wasn’t any reason to put in any at all, but I repressed the comment.

“If you didn’t see my cop-outs, why am I here?” There’s that why again – sometimes I am a slow learner.

“We need to finish your EKG from your intake.”

Now this was about three months later. If I had a heart problem, it would be nice to think that they would have wanted to know before the end of the fiscal quarter. That way they could have prescribed me the wrong medication.

“I have no heart issues,” said I, bravely, refusing to take the opportunity to wax poetic about how my heart had been broken by the sad realization that the American justice system is rife with corruption.

“You’re over 50.”

True. I took my shirt off. He attached the leads and we both watched expectantly as my heart chugged pictorially on the screen in front of me.

“Are you an athlete?” he asked.
As a fairly typical male, my heart swelled with pride at the question, although it didn’t show on the screen. “I play a lot of full-court basketball.”

“Maybe that explains the borderline bradycardia,” he said, “it doesn’t look too bad.”

My heart sank at that, with still no obvious visual impact. It made me wonder if the thing was working or was wrong. Before I could ask for clarification, my shirt was back on and I was hustled out the door with the admonition, “Don’t put in any more cop-outs – I’ll reschedule you.”

Later, my wife sent me some internet printouts about bradycardia, which sounded thoroughly unclear. Usually, it wasn’t fatal, but you did have to make sure that your heart didn’t stop. That night I cannibalized some wire from a broken radio and, using the toothpaste that serves as ubiquitous cubicle glue, stuck them to the wall next to my bunk, right by the outlet. My own emergency crash cart.

I waited about a month for the promised rescheduling, then gave up and put in another cop-out. On this one, I summarized the chronology of all my previous cop-outs, electing to move from the honey to the vinegar stage of my PA relationship. That generated an appointment, and after a mere two and a half months of effort, I was finally able to update my records.
With this kind of experience being the norm, I quickly concluded that one did not want to get ill or injured while incarcerated. In fact, many inmates start to withdraw from any activities that could result in either. The problem is that many of the work settings are so rife with injury-producing opportunities that such occurrences are hard to avoid. It seemed that every week someone was getting hurt. But this must not be true because there was that plaque that I mentioned above, the one that congratulated the camp on being seventy-one days accident free. It was on the outside wall of the dining hall and was in a locked unit, so I’m sure no inmate was resetting the number just to be mischievous.

But one of the problems with going to prison when you are pushing elderly status is that it is difficult to completely avoid encounters with the medical personnel, even should you be highly motivated to do so. There are just too many portions of one’s anatomy that are in various stages of free-fall. While I was able to avoid virtually all contact over the course of my incarceration, there was one thing that I decided to pursue. This concerned the dentist. You see, I have a relatively small permanent bridge, one of those things that gaps across a section of gum and which is permanently affixed to two surviving teeth. That means that there is an area of my gum that is exposed and that becomes a perfect place to trap unwary food items, i.e. the
ones that were unsuccessful in trying to flee my plate faster than I could catch them. After about six months of being unable to clean under this bridge, I decided that I should make the attempt.

Why, you ask, should this be so difficult? Surely, given that they incarcerate a large number of elderly or near-elderly men on a regular basis, they must have appropriate dental hygiene items available. But you forget, the primary concern of this establishment was security and the kind of floppy plastic floss threader that would have done the trick was considered contraband and was simply not available. To be sure, they sold regular dental floss at the commissary, so if one could figure out how to glue several pieces of this together (glue is a contraband item) or perhaps attach it to a D string for a guitar so that it could be drawn through (guitar strings are a contraband item), or maybe use a piece of copper wire from the shop (wire is a contraband item). . . try as I might, I couldn’t seem to figure out how to fashion the appropriate tool for the job. So I decided to utilize the correct channels.

It was with some Kirkegaardian dread that I approached this plan. I was mindful of the recent experience of another elderly gentleman who had needed some assistance from the dentist. He was new to the camp and had the misfortune of being directed to a fill-in dentist, a young male who was himself new to prison
dentistry. The inmate caught this guy as he was exiting the clinic door practicing his escape to the parking lot and said,

“I understand you’re the person I need to rap with....”

The dentist, with anxiety apparently occluding his hearing, thought the guy said “rape” and had him immediately thrown in the hole. It took several days to sort out the confusion. I was motivated to avoid any similar auditory snares.

Since my prior cop-out experience had been so successful, I started with a cop-out to my counselor. After a few days, I sat with him and explained the problem, essentially asking for permission to have my wife mail in a few pieces of Superfloss, a product that I had sitting in my medicine cabinet back home.

“You need to take that up with the Unit Manager,” was the reply.

Now, the Unit Manager is the big boss of the compound, right under the Camp Administrator. He is responsible for seeing to it that all sorts of things malfunction according to some unidentifiable schedule. In my observations of him, I was most struck by the way in which he seemed to deftly avoid anything that approximated work. I didn’t have high hopes for this referral.

I knocked on his door and was ushered into his presence. Trying not to be distracted by the irrelevant thought that he looked a little like Jabba the Hut, I began,
“I have a permanent bridge and can’t clean it with anything that is available through the commissary.”

So far I had his attention, although in his eyes I could clearly see the unstated ‘why the hell is he talking with me about this?’ Attempting to forestall the referral back down the chain, I said.

“Counselor Parker told me I needed to talk to you.”

That was probably twenty verbal lashes later for Parker.

“Can I have my wife mail some in? I can have them sent directly to you, if you would like.”

He mulled a bit before replying, “We can’t have that.”

I waited for some sort of explanation, but none was forthcoming.

“If the concern is security, we own a durable medical equipment company and I can arrange to have the product drop-shipped to you directly, unopened, from the manufacturer.”

I was thinking that perhaps he was concerned that my wife might saturate the Superfloss with Xstacy before putting it back in the factory seal and mailing it.

In an effort to be thorough, I had included a picture of the product that my wife had found in one of our catalogues. He made a great show of looking this over, turning the page in various directions as he did so, for unclear reasons. Perhaps
he was looking for watermarks to make sure that this wasn’t a counterfeit picture of the product.

“We can’t have that,” was the eventual response.

Again, I waited for his neur...ons to fire, something I could almost watch occurring. He turned his head to the side and I resisted the impulse to make a little duck out of my fingers to see if the light behind me projected the shadow through his ears onto the wall behind him.

Eventually, he reached for the phone and called the commissary. After a brief conversation with the guy there he said, “Put in a special commissary order and it will be filled.”

That was the end of the audience.

So, I filled out another cop-put, this one directed to the commissary for a special order, complete with picture, ordering information, and anything else that might be needed. I dropped it off.

My gum under my bridge started to hurt. Perhaps it was simply a psychological suggestion; it was actually starting to feel inflamed.

I waited. One week. Two weeks. Three weeks.

Now I was aware that the special order process at the commissary was a trip all in itself. There was no clue as to how long it would take, or whether the product upon arrival would prove to be the thing that was ordered. Sizing was
particularly difficult, especially for shoes. When they arrived you had to try them on immediately, while about fifty guys were waiting outside to get their commissary in the one-at-a-time booth. If you didn’t try them on and take them, they were yours and could not be returned. One of my friends waited for six months for a pair of boots, only to have them be two sizes too big when they arrived. Just to add spice to things, if you didn’t take them (whether or not they fit) you were black-listed from any further special orders until someone else on the compound bought the thing that you ordered, the one that either didn’t fit or was sent in the wrong size. In his case, it was going to take a while to move the size 15 EEE boots.

I waited.

A month went by.

I waited.

My gum started to hurt more.

I waited.

It started feeling disturbingly squishy, in a way that I had never previously experienced.

I waited.

Finally, I approached a friend who worked in the commissary and asked if he knew whether my special order had been processed. After getting more information, he said,
“Jackson (the CO in charge of the commissary, and a notoriously fine fellow) probably didn’t know what the hell it was and threw the order out. You better put in a new one.”

I was now well over three months into the process. I did another special order sheet, with accompanying cop-out and resubmitted it.

I waited. One week. Two weeks. One month, two months, three months. Nothing. I wasn’t sure what my next step was going to be, but was still invested in solving this problem through the system, such as it was. Others I knew had approached this more directly by simply having their elderly wives smuggle Superfloss or superfloss derivatives into visits, risking the loss of all visiting privileges. It’s interesting how the system conspires to increase criminal behavior among the elderly. But, my history of incarceration and felonious conviction to the contrary, I am a person who follows rules and laws. So I was invested in solving this problem within the system. Besides, I was morbidly fascinated how any system could be quite this dysfunctional.

I waited. Another month went by. The Unit Manager retired. The new Unit Manager was appointed amid much hoopla about how she was going to change the world of the prison camp, allegedly to the benefit of the inmates. So, I put in cop-out
to her. I was immediately summoned into her presence and was encouraged by her smiling demeanor.

I had prepared a summary of my experience to date, complete with copies of approximately ten pages of documents that displayed the track. I shared these with her and looked at her expectantly for guidance.

There was a long pause, after which she said “I’ll look into it.” Great. I left feeling buoyed. It even seemed that the now ever-present pain in my gum receded a bit.

A few days later I was again summoned into her presence.

“You need to put in a cop-out to the dentist, requesting an appointment. Maybe that will help.”

I tried again, “My wife has these in my medicine cabinet; can’t she just mail a couple to you? Or we can arrange to have them drop-shipped directly to you in unopened boxes from the distributor . . .”

“We can’t have that.” It was a very slow echo.

So I put a cop-out into the dentist, requesting an appointment.

I was already aware that dental appointments were backed up for about five months, unless one was in extreme pain. I am not a liar by nature, nor one to exaggerate medical symptoms, so could not bring myself to mark 10 on the subjective, self-report pain scale that accompanied the dental cop-out. Instead, I
marked 2, as that was a more honest reflection of the concern I felt about any incipient infection. But, I also realized the need to up the ante a bit. In the intervening months I had cracked a piece off the back of a molar. Not wanting to lose the filling and, therefore, in the world of the BOP, lose the tooth through extraction, I wrote down that I had chipped a molar.

I waited. One month. Two months. I had reached the one year point in the whole process and something inside me finally gave up. I simply had lost all interest in how the system was going to respond to this problem. Risking possible incarceration for her and a trip to the hole for me, I asked my wife to smuggle two pieces of Superfloss into our next visit. She did so, and I have never been so nervous in my life as when I left that visit, knowing that I was carrying two highly incendiary pieces of contraband back to my cube. But when I flossed later that night and could finally thread something under my bridge, extracting the piece of popcorn shell that had been lurking there for more a year, I understood the true value of crime.

One month later (about five months after I had put in the last cop-out) I found myself on the call-out sheet to see the dentist. After pooh-poohing my broken molar in a very derogatory fashion, the dentist gave me some floss-threaders
from a drawer in her office. All I had to do was ask. It’s interesting how easy it is to slide into a life of crime, and I will always love my wife for muling that Superfloss into me, at great risk of federal prosecutors removing her personal freedoms. And at the end of it all, somehow I couldn’t escape the nagging thought that it could have been handled a bit more easily.

Over the course of my incarceration, there were several injury events that made quite a lasting impression on me, and which helped define the true culture of camp medicine. The first was early in my tenure and involved my bunkie. He had tried to add the end of his finger to the mashed potatoes that he was preparing and had almost succeeded. This was at the ADX and after finishing his shift and wrapping his finger carefully in a dirty towel, to make sure he didn’t get any more blood in the potatoes - you know, universal precautions and all - he returned with us on the bus to the camp. As he walked through the bubble, he showed his mangled finger to the lady CO sitting behind the counter, asking if he could see the PA to get it stitched up.

“There is no doc here on the weekends.”

“OK. How do I see one?”
“Well, there is one at one of the other prisons around here, but it’s really tough to get him over here. Do you have a sewing kit?”

That was a serious question. It brought new meaning to the concept of triage.

On other occasions it was harder to see the humor that lurked beneath the marginal malpractice. There was this young man who made the very big mistake of participating in a potentially injury-producing sport, something many inmates learn to simply avoid at all costs. But the young always tend to think they are bullet proof, and inmates are no exception. In this case the guy broke his foot while playing soccer.

At first it all looked like a normal medical intervention. His foot was placed in a very nice cast and he set about hobbling his way to and from the chow hall and throughout the compound. But at some undefined point the situation took a sinister turn. I think it was when his foot started to look more black than light purple. Of course, there were no end to the number of amateur diagnosticians who weighed in on the matter, but the general view was that black with green tinges looked more normal on the meatloaf we were typically served than on the exposed parts of his foot. I’m sure he put in a cop-out to have it looked at, but we know how that goes. So he mostly settled for limping around the compound for several weeks while
his foot approximated a trip through the dark end of the color
spectrum.

Finally he got in to see someone in medical and they
decided that perhaps something was awry. Since it was late fall
– early winter some of us had started a pool on whether it was
frostbite or gangrene. The clinic folks, not having a clear
stake in the pool, decided that perhaps someone should look at
it that had a bit more expertise, like someone with a medical
license. Of course, they could have asked one of the
incarcerated physicians who had been imprisoned for making bad
investments, but none of us who had actual medical training were
ever allowed to weigh in on inmate medical issues. We were
instructed to just step over them until they stopped jerking.
When this inmate was finally taken for an outside consult it was
discovered that the cast had been put on so tightly that it had
stopped the circulation in his foot. The outside practitioners
seemed surprised that no one had checked the cast after a couple
of days to see if there was blood flow, or performed any other
follow-up. They were surprised; we weren’t. It was a little
more disturbing to this guy when they told him his foot was now
such a mess that they weren’t sure they were going to be able to
save it. He had gone from a twenty-three-year-old soccer player
to a potential amputee in very short order. Eventually, after
they were forced to rebreak his foot because it had healed so
poorly, and he hobbled around for several more months, he regained its use. Watching this, I vowed never to even look sideways at a basketball game until I went home. And I surely wasn’t going to allow anyone to put a cast around my neck.

There was, of course, an occasional lighter side to all this. I had a sixty-two-year-old friend who starting experiencing pain in his back. He managed to wangle an appointment with the PA and actually made was ushered in to be seen. With his nose in his computer, the PA queried,

“Why are you here?”

“I have a lot of pain . . .” that’s as far as my friend got.

“What’s your name?”

My friend told him. Now the PA was even more deeply into his computer screen.

“Why are you here?”

“I have a lot of pain . . .” Again, he got no further.

“You’re old, deal with it.”

That certainly put a new spin on bedside manner and the practice of gerontological medicine.

After recovering from his surprise, my friend started to defend himself, “I’m not that old.”

The PA sighed. A troublemaker. “Take some ibuprofen” (the universal solvent), “drink lots of water, and walk the track.”
“I’m already taking 2400 mg of IBU a day --- do you want me to take more?”

The demeanor suggested that this appointment was starting to border on harassment in the mind of the PA. Inmates with medical questions? Who did they think they were?

“Get some exercise.” This to a guy who exercised about five hours a day. In fact, it was probably his obsessive commitment to exercise and activity that was killing his back. But that was it. The appointment was over and he dragged his aching, old bones back to the yard.

So medicine at the BOP was something of an adventure, at best. You learned to follow a few simple survival rules. Don’t get sick, or hurt. If you do get sick or hurt, don’t get treatment. If you do get treatment, quit complaining and take your ibuprofen.

Oh, and if you see the dentist -- RUN.
Every culture has its boogeyman, that semi-mythical creature that is both the presumed genesis of all societal ills and wielder of power over all things. The prison camp society is no different. Where primitives might have gathered around a totem pole that represented Quargle, alternating between bouts of shaking and the kind of angry recrimination that is born of true powerlessness, the prison camp had Huffert. Huffert was all-seeing. Huffert was all-knowing. Huffert was demonic. Huffert could bring the strongest and most seasoned of inmates to task for any of an infinitude of transgressions. In reality, Huffert was middle-sized. Huffert was bald. Huffert had a paunch, squinty eyes, and a sense of menace that projected about five feet in front of him on a good day. Huffert was, well, Huffert.

Prison camp guards come in many shapes and sizes, as well as temperaments. Some are quite genial, some are distant, some talk to you like you were just scraped off their shoe, and some seem to understand that you are actually a human being. They
are short, tall, black, white, pink, blonde, gray – they wear earrings, pinky rings, sport tattoos, in fact, they are indistinguishable from the inmates in all respects, save the most important one – they don’t wear green. That, and their behavior suggests a higher incidence of prefrontal lobotomies. I understand the green thing and don’t blame them. As soon as I left incarceration I threw any green item in my wardrobe on our burn pile. To avoid any confusion with inmates in prison the guards wear blue, or white if they are really important, and jangle especially loudly when they walk. And as with any group of people, some stand out, and not always for the best of reasons. Which brings us back to Huffert.

Huffert was a low-grade sadist, the kind of person who probably liked pulling the wings off flies as a child. He was the bully who grew up and found a job where bullying was supported by a healthy paycheck and benefits. He wore his authority like a weapon, and swung it freely and indiscriminately. He was simply a bad person masquerading as a good guy.

Now I’m sure that he had a wife and family who loved him. At least I suspect he had a wife and family who tolerated him. Actually, I mostly wondered if he had a wife and family who were terrified of him.
The second day that I was on the compound there was an inmate uprising of sorts. You need to remember that this is a camp peopled by accountants, bankers and drug dealers, the vast majority of the latter being the non-violent type. An uprising in this setting means that the complaining moves from the verbal to the written arena, in this case taking the form of a very large number of cop-outs, some two hundred and seventeen of them in fact. Rather than requests for appointments, these cop-outs were complaint forms suggesting that some staff member had behaved in a manner that the inmates found sufficiently and consistently egregious that they were willing to go on record with a complaint in triplicate. In this case, the target was exclusively Huffert.

That was nearly half the camp at that time and I was impressed. Only presidents usually can engender that kind of enmity. Not that it did any good. Huffert disappeared for a few days, presumably to read his fan mail, and then was back, with a list.

Noting this episode, I set about trying to identify what exactly it was about the Dread Huffert that could get people so riled up. Over time, the answer became clear.

Whenever Huffert was going to be on, a schedule that was well known to every member of the camp and that was incorporated into temporary doggerel on bathroom walls; everyone
automatically began to prepare for uproar. Where most of the other COs managed to operate in relatively peaceful coexistence with the campers, Huffert had the unique ability to anger a meditating Buddhist monk. Each night that he was on he would visit the pods raising hell about one issue or another, always pointing to the *Up-to-Date/Out-of-Date Handbook* as the source for the regulations that he was quoting.

“Get the towel off the floor,” he would growl as he was inspecting a room.

“It’s there for people to wipe their feet so that my cube stays clean,” the targeted inmate proffered, with some trepidation.

“Get that fucking thing off the floor,” Huffert snarled, being a seasoned snarler.

In these kinds of situations if the inmate wasn’t fast enough the “thing” in question could be picked up and thrown down the hallway.

Or, “You can’t hang that shit on the walls.”

The shit in question were clothes that simply wouldn’t fit in the inmate’s 3 x 4 foot locker, unless it was to be somehow wedged into a 4th dimensional adjoining space.

“You have too many clothes.”

This was a good one, as the clothes in question had been bought by the inmate at the commissary, where the BOP had
presumably benefited from the mark-up. At twelve cents an hour, it probably took the guy a while to earn enough to get the offending unmarked gray sweatshirt, undoubtedly a piece of gang apparel. Except, gray sweatshirts were all they sold, so we must have all been in the same gang. I had assumed the plan was to reduce inter-gang friction.

In fact, the whole issue of what clothing was allowed seemed to exist in a regulatory No Man’s Land. They sold all sorts of stuff at the commissary, but that didn’t mean it was actually OK to possess it in one’s cube. Whether your clothing survived confiscation or destruction by the COs seemed to have little to do with what it was, and a lot to do with the CO’s mood at the time. It was clear that you couldn’t alter clothing in any way, as that was considered destruction of government property, even though the inmate had purchased it with his own money and it was listed as personal property if the inmate was transferred to another facility. Nor was it clear how many items of a particular thing an inmate could possess. To be sure, since they were being confiscated frequently, continuous replacement was a necessity. But the actual limits were completely unclear. Some COs would announce that you could only have two of a particular kind of shirt and that having more might just get you sent to the hole. For other COs the number might be five, or six. It was one of the many complete crap
shoots that defined life in the camp. And Huffert’s attempt to key all his preferences to regulations that only he could find written anywhere made him a Master of the Game.

My favorite Huffert move in that game was when he decided to make a religious statement. Citing a rule about covers on books, he confronted an inmate.

“Take that cover off that book. If it’s still there tomorrow, I’ll tear it in half.”

The cover in question was a very finely tooled leather cover; the book in question was the Bible. The inmate in question was very religious and did not take well to the idea of someone tearing his Bible in half. Neither did the Camp Administrator.

This was one of the more interesting things about the Trials of Huffert, as I tended to think about it. He was apparently beyond administrative control. Many is the day that I would listen to several of the other guards grumbling about how his intransigence and lack of common sense were only making their jobs that much harder. Yet no one could apparently stop him. There was something of a closet industry on the campus trying to figure out why that was the case. Was it the union? Did he have something on the warden? Was he just secretly carrying out the fantasies of the other COs who simply were too humanized to behave so obnoxiously? Everyone had a theory or
opinion, and you know what they say about that. Meanwhile, Huffert huffed on.

“Take that thing down!”

It was not a request. This time the thing in question was a shoelace rather cleverly crafted with a series of knots tied in it, called a clothes waterfall. That allowed for several coat hangers to be hung in a relatively small space. Given that each of us only had a small space to work with, this seemed like a good compromise solution. It also didn’t involve the restructuring of federal property in any really permanent way, something that is a really major no-no.

“Take the fucking thing down!!”

Obviously, the inmate in question had been too slow in his response.

This brings up the question of the use of language at the BOP. I’m not a prude and have used my share of obscenities over the course of my life. When I taught graduate school I warned my students as a matter of course that obscenities might happen in my classroom, so they should get their tape recorders ready for the University PC police. But never had I been in an environment where they were used as communication constants, and with so little literary purpose. It was not even particularly inventive, although I did note that one inmate managed to use ‘fuck’ and its derivatives as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb
and the subject of the introductory clause, all in a single sentence. But more than the use by inmates, I was astonished when I heard the COs joining in. I came from work settings where it was important to remain aware of one’s language at all times, lest one find oneself in front of a labor relations board. In the camp it was nothing for certain guards to address inmates as “motherfuckers” with a certain amount of nonchalance. It took some getting used to, particularly since I was sixty and some of them looked about twelve.

After such clear direction from Huffert the inmate had removed the “thing” that was causing all the stir and Huffert had moved on. It was like watching a malevolent ripple effect in the air. He hadn’t gone very far.

In the next cube an inmate had a chessboard that he had crafted out of cardboard and which he kept safely (and neatly) stored behind his locker so that it wouldn’t cause him any problems. But this was Huffert.

“What the fuck is this thing?!”

Most people know what a chessboard looks like, even those who don’t play chess -- you know, the whole alternating black and white squares motif.

“It’s a chessboard.”

“Get rid of it!” Again, it wasn’t a request and there was considerable quivering of jowls involved.
There was a brief pause, then the inmate explained in a very patient tone, “I’m a teacher; I use it to demonstrate the ancient Chinese math problem where you double the grains of rice on each square, just to show how huge the numbers get. I’m at square 35 and I’m about to drain the warehouse with the next step.”

Ok, so the guy didn’t really say this, but I thought it. I didn’t say it either. What the guy did say didn’t go over much better.

“Get rid of it yourself.”

This particular inmate had been down a long time and had reached the end of his patience, even with the Dread Huffert. Now the jowls weren’t just quivering, they were creating a minor sonic boom by slamming together. The entire range of cubes held its collective breath, assuming that the inmate was on a short trip to the hole. To our combined astonishment, apparently Huffert couldn’t find the appropriate regulation in his limited frontal lobe, so rather than taking the inmate away then and there, he simply grabbed the offending piece of cardboard and scaled it down the thirty feet of the range. He then stomped out, presumably looking for easier prey, maybe a baby seal. The range breathed again and I went back to trying to develop a variant for the Dewey Decimal system that could incorporate my sock lint.
Huffert’s Reign of Terror continued on an intermittent basis, as did the various rumors attempting to explain his continued presence in the camp. We were told that the BOP didn’t dare work him in the yard of an actual prison, because there the inmates would simply remove him from the earth permanently, much as they might swat a particularly pernicious mosquito. Knowing this, he kept being scheduled to the camp, where the inmates actually had something to lose and thus were ripe to be terrorized.

Over time I came to see him as like someone struggling with a low-grade psychosis, where thinking has become sufficiently disorganized that the person pursues tangents in a seemingly uncontrolled fashion. One week, with no apparent trigger, he initiated a campaign of confiscation, seemingly enamored with the idea of removing things. I wondered if he was running a second hand store on the outside.

Then he took a guy’s half-filled bag of hot chocolate, accusing him of having stolen it from one of the kitchens. The guy had bought it from the commissary – I know because I had a similar bag sitting in my locker. Annoyed, the inmate took his receipt up to the bubble (which had finally emerged from my conceptual fog in the form of the central administrative region of the camp. I never did figure out why they called it the bubble. Bubblehead Place I would have understood.) This inmate
got his chocolate back, and then went to his highly subversive job of teaching GED classes in the education department. When he got back to his cube, Huffert had been there first and had completely trashed it. Huffert must have really wanted that chocolate. I made note of that and thereafter left a plate of cookies with some chocolate milk on my locker whenever I left my cube on the days he was scheduled. I thought of it like a gift to Bad Santa.

Then there was the day Huffert decided to tear up the Native American sweat lodge, which existed out by the pagan site. The BOP actually does attempt to accommodate the various faiths practiced by the inmates, although the Rastas have had to make some adjustments. Huffert must have missed the accommodation memo. Tearing up religious material seemed to be a specialty for him.

But for all his numerous quasi-sadistic transgressions, Huffert served a vital function in camp life. If something was not going well, regardless of the nature of the problem, there was always Huffert to blame.

“Anybody know what the weather is going to be today?”

“Is Huffert on?”

Only in camp life would that answer have made complete sense.
But with most bogeymen there is a lifespan to their influence. Eventually they begin to fade away, becoming the things of obscurity and myth. Huffert was no different. At one point, he simply wasn’t around anymore; the rumors flew for a while. He had been fired. He was on an extended motorcycle trip. He had retired. He had been transferred to another camp. He had become a vice-principal in a high school. Noxious fluids had finally eaten him from the inside out.

As inmates gathered around the weight pile in the evenings, it became—“Remember when Huffert used to . . .” “Huffert wasn’t so bad --- I was just waiting to tell him off.” And from the newer inmates—“Tell me another Huffert story, Dex.”

It has oft been noted that nature abhors a vacuum. I was walking across the compound one day and heard an inmate say “Who’s that?” indicating a very short and unfamiliar CO wandering aimlessly in the region of the bubble.

“Isn’t that Jenkins?”

“Oh, God,” said the more seasoned inmate, “not Jenkins. He’s like a mini-Huffert.”

And so the wheel turns.
Dante was creative enough to describe three metaphysical realities in his grand work *The Divine Comedy* -- the inferno, purgatory and paradise. To him that seemed to exhaust the possibilities. He’s to be forgiven for his short-sightedness because the ADX kitchen hadn’t yet been built. Otherwise, surely he would have written a fourth book. The ADX kitchen is really quite unlike any other place on Earth that I have experienced. On the surface, it is simply an industrial kitchen, designed to meet the culinary needs of some five hundred inmates, all of whom are so deeply nested in the bowels of the world’s most secure prison that no kitchen worker would ever encounter anything more than a rumor of their existence. That does tend to cut down on complaints, which probably explains a lot of what I witnessed while working there. But
beneath that seemingly benign exterior roils a cesspool of human dynamics that almost defies explanation.

The ADX kitchen is staffed by about four COs at any given time, all of whom seemed to me to raise the concept of burnout to near incendiary levels. They supervised a rotating collection of inmates who shared only one characteristic - they all hated the place and tried their best to get assigned to other duties. With very few exceptions, from the day an inmate began work at the ADX he immediately began working on his exit strategy. Those who had even mild medical problems suddenly became almost completely incapacitated. Those that didn’t have identified problems hit the medical dictionaries in the camp library in the evenings. Some of this behavior was quite creative. One day one of the COs shot some stuff out of an aerosol can and an inmate about thirty feet away immediately keeled over, gasping and wheezing as if he had been assigned sewer duties in Calcutta. Another intentionally lay down in a pool of corrosive chemicals, hoping to take off enough skin that he would be unable to respond when the COs yelled “trash run!” at the end of the shift. In short, the ADX kitchen is a place where work ethics go to die.

Although I approached the situation with considerable angst, my first day at the ADX was more comic than threatening. Because I had been given no orientation whatsoever, I had no
idea where I was supposed to go or what I was supposed to do. I
was let onto a long hallway that led to the kitchen proper,
along with the other fifteen guys on my shift. It was 4:15 am
so none of us would have qualified for designation as the best
and the brightest. I fell into the loose line of inmates filing
in the door and looked for guidance. Actually, I looked for the
first door to my right and took it. That put me in the dish
room.

For me, the term “dish room” conjured up images of a White
House tour, where some attractive staffer would keep up a
running commentary about how taxpayer money had been converted
to gold leaf and ornate soup tureens, presumably for the
betterment of the country. This wasn’t like that. The dish
room was where the trays, cups, utensils, and the lesser pots
and pans were all processed, multiple times a day. There
actually was a greater pots and pans processing place that I was
to discover later. The dish room was dominated by what looked
like a car wash for Tonka toys, this thirty-foot long
contraption that was designed to wash a great multitude of
dishes in a very short period of time. The opening at one end
was hidden from my view but, upon entering the room, I could
clearly see the disgorging point. As it was the only thing in
the room that looked immediately comprehensible in terms of form
and function, I made a bee-line to it. That’s how I became the
Prime AM Dish Catcher at the ADX, a position I was to hold for the next two months.

When I first approached the yawning jaw of the dish machine, it was already being serviced by another inmate, one who had come in with me but who had been faster to recognize the turf. Either that or he had worked there before – it was never clear. The whole thing felt a little like the Oklahoma Land Rush, with inmates flying in the door and heading in every direction. Some of us just ended up planting our flags a little closer to the starting line.

This other inmate seemed to be standing expectantly at the opening of the dish machine, even though nothing was emerging. That appeared to be an acceptable thing to do so I took a place standing on the other side and tried to look equally expectant. I looked expectantly at him. He looked expectantly at me. He (being obviously more skilled in the setting) transferred his expectant look to the machine itself by bending over and looking deeply in the dark, dank interior. I was hesitating to copy this particular behavior. I didn’t know exactly how the thing operated and had a brief image of his skull being cleaved by a flying plate. Besides, I figured if there was something there, he’d see it and tell me about it. After a moment he returned to his expectant stance. Still no dishes.

“Is this your first?”
“What?” I could tell he missed it, but I decided to soldier on.

“Have you ever had a plate before?”

He looked at me like I had lost at least some portion of my mind.

“I’m Bill,” I said, extending my hand, as I had not yet converted to the ever present prison fist touch.

“Cuervo,” was the reply. I didn’t ask, although I admit to being curious.

Cuervo looked me over, “First day?”

That must have been obvious.

“Yes. Should I be doing something?”

“You are.”

Oh.

We both went back to our states of expectancy with respect to the machine. Siddhartha was reported to have said that of the important things he learned in his quest for enlightenment, the most significant was how to wait. Perhaps he did a brief stint in India’s equivalent of the Florence Prison Camp. We did a lot of waiting.

After a while it occurred to me that something was missing, other than the normal missing ingredients of prison life, like meaning, sense, and general relevance. Then it hit me. There
was no noise. Perhaps that was because the machine wasn’t turned on.

When I realized that I wondered why Cuervo had been looking up the chute, so to speak, but, again, decided not to ask. I had learned that in prison one had to move slowly in social encounters.

This noise situation was corrected in relatively short order. Some unseen individual on the other side of this behemoth must have hit a switch because all of a sudden it sounded like someone had thrown a Volkswagen engine into a large blender. There was a shuddering, screeching sound that would never be confused with the noises of a finely tuned and well-balanced machine. With it was a slight vibration, as if the motor mounts on a caterpillar tractor were failing. After about thirty seconds of this, the plates began to arrive.

Actually, the food at the ADX is transferred around on cafeteria trays of different colors. The colors are to keep track of the diets. The BOP tries to accommodate the various dietary preferences of the inmates. There are the “no meat” folks (who are likely philosophically opposed to violence against animals and are incarcerated at the ADX for having killed someone at an animal rights rally), the “heart healthy” folks (the ones I imagined have a rotating squirrel track in their cells), and the “kosher” folks (no doubt members of the
widely recognized Hassidic crime family, the Robbersteins). The rest are presumed to be dietetically normal which must refute dietary explanations for antisocial behavior. Sometimes the differences in daily cuisine are fairly subtle, but the BOP does try. The trays were of four colors, one for each diet. So what began to emerge from our end of the dish machine was a rainbow of trays, followed by rows and rows of plastic lids. The lids were all clear plastic, except for the food particles that the machine had been unsuccessful in removing during the cleaning process. There was obviously a similar problem with the trays. Our job was to catch and sort these things as they came from the machine. One of the first things I noticed was that, while quite hot, they weren’t always particularly clean. But that was OK, because we each had a couple of rags that we could use to wipe them out. Of course, those rags were cold and wet and, after a while, fairly gross to look at. But they did remover the major particles. At least they probably frightened the residual bacteria.

This apparently simple and repetitive task proved to be something of a challenge. There were times I was reminded of the famous I Love Lucy episode in the cake factory. You had to keep up and they didn’t stop coming. If you missed a tray or lid it would carry on through to a kill bar, and if that happened it would cause the machine to come to an immediate
halt. From a sound standpoint this was noticeable, kind of a
like the end of a multicar accident at freeway speed. At that
point I was fairly certain someone would emerge from the other
end of the machinery in question. I had yet to meet the person
who was somehow managing to rapidly insert a seemingly endless
number of items into the machine. For the moment I was
completely comfortable allowing that Ork to remain nameless and
unknown.

When things were flying in the dish room, I spent up to two
hours at a time catching dishes as fast as I could move my
hands. Later, as I became more sophisticated, I tried to build
it into a kind of dance step – the Dish Room Shuffle, sort of
like a prison line dance. Forward one step – quarter-turn right
– reach and spin – quarter-turn left – forward two steps – reach
and drop – back two steps–spin right – reach. Again and again
and again. I found that this kind of cried out for country
lyrics.

“IIIIIIIIII’ve been down so long I don’t even know my sin .
.
.”
Reach and spin – back one step – hop.

“IIIIIIIIII can’t even tell the fuckin’ joint I’m in . . . .”
Side step – kick – forward two steps.

“MMMMMMMaybe the Man will let me go home soon . . . .”
Wheel and drop – boot slap – reach and kick.
ff’n He don’t I’ll be crazy as a fuckin’ loon.

Reach, spin, drop, turn, kick, grab – again. During nonperformance moments I considered petitioning the Olympic Committee to add it as a sport. It might prove to be as interesting as some other recent additions.

To be sure, there were other duties in the dish room besides dish catching, and as time went on I was learn them all. For example, there was banging. Actually, to be more precise, there was tray banging. The dishes that were being thrust into the dish machine by the as yet unidentified entity at the other end of the wormhole did not simply materialize. That was actually the midpoint of a fairly involved process. The trays were dragged into the kitchen by those inmates with intact backs in large rolling carts. Each cart held about a hundred or so trays and weighed in the neighborhood of six hundred pounds. This was largely due to the hot and cold sides each cart possessed, with all the relevant supportive machinery.

Physics being what it is, the concept of mass in motion meant that these mothers had considerable inertia. Once rolling at even moderate speed they would have punched a hole through a wall before stopping. Of all the things I witnessed during my relatively short time at the ADX it occurred to me that these carts were probably the greatest potential threat to security.
An inmate closed up inside of one and given a good push by his brethren could probably have plowed through walls, doors, fences, and razor wire in a mad bid for freedom. Of course, depending on which side he rode in, he would have arrived either parboiled or a Popsicle. And there is always the consideration that since all the inmate workers were from the camp, all he would really have had to do was wait until the end of his shift, ride back on the bus, and walk away from the compound, there being no fence and all. Still . . .

If pushed with the proper amount of thrust into the dish room, the cart would end up positioned next to a long metal table, where it was unloaded by an inmate creating a large tower of dirty trays. There was a certain amount of ego involved in this process, with some of the younger inmates deriving great satisfaction from having towers of twenty-five trays in their hands at one time, then balancing them in transit to the table in front of the sink. While representing a dizzying display of balance and agility, this image was undermined when the entire tower occasionally fell over in transit, spreading half-eaten food along about a twenty-foot expanse of table.

I was watching all this from my place at the end of the dish machine, stealing quick glances between my pirouettes in the unloading dance. I was still trying to get a sense of my fellow workers, all of whom seemed to have clearly delineated
functions. In addition to the intermittently competent unloader, there was the lead soaker (who also appeared to be the man in charge, based on the general glower) and the lidder-banger combinations, a task that required the cooperation of two inmates. In a nod to OSHA, the lidder stood on an empty unstable milk crate, so that he could reach to the top of the twenty-five trays that had been picked up and restacked, taking the clear plastic lid off each tray so that the banger had ready access to its contents. Then the banger took the tray and thumped it soundly against the side of a large plastic trash can that stood handy, knocking all food stuffs off in preparation for the tray being restacked and transferred to the entry point of the dish machine. There was a definite rhythm to this process, as well as a great deal of noise. The thump, thump, thump of the banger took on the sound of a giant heartbeat of the kitchen, one that worked itself permanently into my psyche and that I can still hear when things around me fall silent.

To this point, I had only conversed with the man at the dish machine with me, and he wasn’t exactly the conversational type. It was enough for him to simply get the disgorged trays sorted accurately. The rest of his time was spent refining his ADX exit strategy, and I noted that he was developing a limp that was becoming more impairing on an hourly basis. This was a Tuesday and on Tuesdays he was practicing grimacing, trying to
time the rictus with the lurching steps. As he began to slowly hunch forward, I started to think that I had been dropped into the second act of Shakespeare’s Richard III. It didn’t seem that he was long for the world, let alone the ADX kitchen. He was certainly too preoccupied to be very social. In fact, perhaps due to the ungodly racket of the dish machine and the steady *thump, thump, thump* of the bangers, the dish room did not seem to be exactly social central.

I had just drawn this conclusion when I heard a burst of song from the back of the room. The machine-feeding ork was about to make an appearance.

“And it’s one for the money, two for the show, three to get ready and go, cat go!”

Out from the back of the machine bounded a guy who would charitably be described as portly, sporting a long blond ponytail and holding up a spoon as an ersatz microphone.

For the next few minutes we were treated to a credible imitation of Elvis, from a man who I learned later was an investment broker and official Elvis impersonator, last playing in Laughlin, Nevada.

“Love me tender – love me sweet—–”

The guy had a decent voice and was pitch on throughout the show. I noticed that everyone else just kept on working,
although the thump, thump, thump of the bangers, seemed to accelerate or decelerate with the medley’s rhythm changes.

“Little sister don’t ya . . .”

He spun the imaginary cord adroitly in his hand, grinding ample hips with a dexterity belied by his general body type. This was definitely the Elvis of the lounge years, only dressed in green.

“Baby, let me be your teddy bear . . .”

Given the circumstances, this could have been a disturbing imagine. But, then, given the circumstances, the entire sequence had a bizarre quotient that was off the charts.

He bowed. “Thank you, thank you – you’ve been a wonderful audience. We’ll be here all week.”

He tossed the spoon into an empty tray and spun back to his dish loading dock.

The thumping picked up briefly in frequency and volume, clearly intended to approximate applause, as he disappeared back behind the dish machine.

I looked at my fellow dish-catcher, but the entire incident seemed to have gone almost completely unnoticed by him. He was fixated on something apparently far more compelling that was going on in the dish machine. I followed his gaze and saw that there was definitely a change in the works. All of a sudden there was a host of metal pans headed in our direction. This
was going to be a definite problem as all the available stacking space on our end was covered with wavering towers of now partially cleaned trays. There was no place for these pans to go.

In the nick of time an inmate appeared from the kitchen proper, presumably in response to some unseen signal that I had yet to learn. It occurred to me that perhaps it was all timed to happen at the end of the floor show. In any case, in he rolled with a metal table just in time for us to off-load all the pans. The inmate network was clearly a well-oiled machine. Actually, based on the noise continuing to emanate from the dish machine well-oiled was probably a misnomer, but the inmates certainly seemed to have a functional system in place.

Inmates are like that, I have discovered. Like the engineers in the famous scene from the movie *Apollo 13*, where all the various pieces of junk are dumped on a table and they are given twenty minutes to design an oxygen scrubber, I’ve found that inmates are some of the more creative thinkers I’ve ever encountered.

“Here, take this piece of string, tube of toothpaste, a desiccated cheerio, a little of eye of newt and see if you can signal the team on the other hillside to make the contraband drop tonight.”
Inmates live in an environment of forced deprivation, and have learned to find utility for the most amazing things. Throughout my time, it was the only episode of my life where I can remember getting excited when I found an intact rubber band on the compound grounds.

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Now you might think that orientation would have preceded any of my kitchen jobs, but that would only be if you were used to working in an actual employment setting. In prison, where the work model is loosely adapted from the administration’s clandestine reading of The Tao of Inefficiency, first you work, and then you get oriented. I wondered if this was actually calculated so that creativity would not be inhibited by untimely training, but as I got to know the BOP I slapped myself a few times and scrapped that thought. Actually, I buried it so deeply that I would never be tempted to even consider it again. Doing things backwards is simply the BOP way. That’s why even the COs have learned to lovingly refer to it as “Backwards on Purpose,” without even the slightest hint of shame. So, my first shift of dish room work was eventually interrupted so that I could get oriented.

All of us newbies were told to go and sit at tables that were situated next to the huge cauldrons that looked for all the world like props from a modern version of Macbeth. I later
learned that those were huge pressurized bean pots where various accompanying food items were heated. I first learned this from another inmate who had accidentally blown one up once in a different prison kitchen, at least he claimed it was accidental. We were joined at the table next to these pots by a woman who was to be our primary shift supervisor, except for the days when she wasn’t, which were apparently subject to no clear scheduling process. It’s possible that BOP scheduling is handled centrally from Washington, DC, as that might explain the complete apparent dysfunctionality of the product. Or it just may be that when you have two thousand people employed to do the work of twenty, it is difficult to keep track of all the resulting loose time. In any case, there were many days when this lady was in charge and she actually turned out to be generally nice. In the world of BOP COs, that’s memorable. But on this day, she was all business.

I was handed a document that was about eighteen pages long, with entries on almost every line. It detailed my job duties, sort of, listed every conceivable chemical with which I might come into contact, identified a wide variety of machines and equipment, many of which were completely unknown to me, and just generally tried to cover the waterfront of things that I could possibly encounter during my time working for the BOP. For being paid twelve cents an hour, there was certainly an
expectation of a high level of industrial knowledge and mechanical competence. As far as I knew, there was only one engineer currently incarcerated at the camp and they had him buffing floors. My level of mechanical competence falls somewhere between that of a musk melon and a macaque, so it was with some trepidation that I looked at this list. Being ever the studious sort, I raised my hand.

“What am I supposed to with this?”

I guess it was designed to be obvious, but I could think of multiple possibilities, some of which would have been anatomically damaging and one of which would have involved the CO in that damaging process and would have gotten me thrown in the hole.

“Just sign it and initial it, where indicated.”

Now a large portion of my incarceration was a direct result of my signing documents that I had not prepared, read, or reviewed. While that is a common occurrence in an actual business environment, the prosecutors, who have made it their lives’ holy work to destroy American citizens, are very literal in this area and seem to assume that every document one signs has been carefully read and closely reviewed. They then put the document in front of you on the witness stand and either smile unctuously or thunder (depending upon personality factors),

“Is this your signature?”
Usually it is, not that the document in question has any necessary meaning to you. Most people in business have no memory of (and often no understanding of) much of what they sign. But, usually, when caught so red-handed with such damning evidence, your head drops and you say,

“That’s my signature.”

“Aha!! Didn’t you see here on page thirty-six, down here at the bottom, between the entries in Sanskrit and Swahili, where it says “...under penalty of perjury...” The word perrrrjurrrrry is often drawn out for effect, typically accompanied with a sidelong glance at the jury. Let’s ignore the fact that actively suborning perjury in exchange for plea bargains has become standard practice for federal prosecutors. But I digress.

The bottom line is, they have you. Such encounters are the prosecutors’ bread and butter these days and it becomes leverage material when they decide to incarcerate you. Trust me on this one.

So when I was about to be sentenced I promised the judge that I would never, ever, ever again sign something without reading it closely. Oddly, I found this a very difficult promise to keep during my incarceration. More than once I had to remind a BOP employee that I actually had to have some time to read a document before I was simply going to scratch my
signature on it. This generally annoyed them, and kept me at
risk for retaliation. But I have tried to keep my promise to
the judge.

I looked more carefully at these eighteen pages. I
realized that, among other things, by signing and initialing I
was attesting to having received instructions about all the
materials and equipment listed. Some of the machines were
completely unrecognizable to me. Not only had I not received
any orientation on them, but I couldn’t have distinguished them
from a 1978 Impala, well, maybe from an Impala, on a good day.
In addition, while I have a good general understanding of
chemistry, many of the chemicals listed were by brand names,
which were meaningless to me. I assumed that anything ending in
zene was probably not a kitchen food additive, although my
experiences so far at chow did not make that a given, but the
industrial uses of most of the others were lost on me. Then
there was a part where I was attesting to my understanding of
the Workman’s Comp policies of the BOP. Now, I am familiar with
Workman’s Comp in the real world, and, as an employer,
understand the purpose of a designated physician to handle the
screening of claims. But I thought about importing that
thinking into the BOP, where the primary medical intervention is
handled by someone who, charitably, falls under the category of
qualified-lite, and, I admit, it was worrisome.
So I was faced with a dilemma. Here I was, deeply embedded in the inner workings of the New Alcatraz, not sure whether my movement was going to be further in or further out, being asked to essentially repeat the alleged offense that got me incarcerated in the first place, with a fair amount of external pressure to do so.

To grasp the true nature of this pressure you have to understand that in the BOP, one of the first rules you learn is an inmate cannot refuse the direct order of a CO, no matter how lunatic it may appear. And believe me, one is frequently confronted with semi-lunatic orders. Only once did I see widespread rebellion of such an order. That occurred one day when we were hit with a major thunderstorm, accompanied by hail. Most of us were scattered around the compound when the hail turned into golf ball-sized missiles. Some CO up in the bubble must have panicked (assuredly with our best interests at heart) because he came over the speaker system shouting.

“Recall! Recall! -- Everybody back to your housing units!”

We all looked at the hundred yards of so of exposed area between us and the housing, looked at the very hard and icy ping pong balls falling out of the sky, then looked at each other.

“You first.”
No one moved and we were all wondering if they had enough cells in the hole to house three hundred of us. It took that much drama for us to defy that CO’s orders.

In contrast, signing a bunch of false attestations on an orientation sheet didn’t seem to measure up. So, I admit it, I caved. Somewhere in the BOP is a packet of papers with my signature on it signifying that I had become a highly trained and fully oriented industrial kitchen employee. Not a word of it was true. I was completely clueless most, if not all, of the time I was there.

Eventually, my day ended and I returned to the camp to regroup. I have to admit, 3:30 came early, even with my typical insomnia, a tendency that was being reinforced by being awakened and counted at 12, 3 and 5. As the days went by, I became even more of an early bird than usual, wandering up to the bubble in the dead of night, and doing my part to keep the inmates at the ADX reasonably well fed. Yet there were times when it seemed to me that getting to work was fraught with almost as much adventure as being at work. Somehow these incidents always seemed to involve the Smoking Priest on the other side of the confessional window.

I had been working at the ADX for about a week when we had a serious cold snap, down to about twenty below. I hadn’t yet purchased anything other than my issue clothing so when
reporting for work I spent much of my time standing outside the security entrance doing calisthenics to try to keep from becoming comatose from hypothermia. I finally had had enough and noticed that they were selling scarves at the commissary. Now normally I’m not a big scarf guy. I remember reading about how Isadora Duncan, the famous dancer, reportedly died when her long, very fashionable scarf got caught in the wheels of her car and snapped her neck. But this thing in the commissary window looked more like a survival issue than a fashion statement. So I bought one. The next day I wore it to work.

This time during the check-in process I only had to repeat my name three or four times to the Smoking Priest, so we must have been getting used to each other. Then he looked up at me and barked,

“What’s that thing?”

The “thing” was the scarf. And it looked a lot like a scarf. It was knitted and wrapped around my neck in a scarf-like fashion. I suppose it could have been a wooly boa constrictor that I was taking to work so that I could join the floor show as a pole dancer. After my last experience with this guy and not wanting to confuse things too much, I responded,

“It’s a scarf.”

“Where’d you get it?”
Well, now, it seemed unlikely that I had rolled someone for a scarf, and I hadn’t been there long enough to produce one in the crocheting class.

“I bought it.”

“How much did you pay?”

On the surface this sounded like an innocent question, but it was anything but. This was a typical trap question that COs loved to use, hoping that you wouldn’t know so that they could continue in their paranoid belief that you garnered an article through some kind of clandestine operation, perhaps by robbing a gay fashion model who just happened to wander through the compound. As luck would have it, I knew the price, a rarity for me in any situation, I might add.

“$5.25, I think.”

I wasn’t that sure.

“Where’d you buy it?”

There are some questions and situations that just cry out for a smart-ass response. “Let’s see, amazon.com, I think,’ except that we didn’t have access to computers. “You know, I think this was part of the shipment from Lands End that came in last week.” Or, ‘Don’t you remember that beach vendor that you guys let in last week?’ I chose the safe route.

“At commissary.”
This seemed to appease him and he waved me through so I could take my place in the chairs, awaiting my ride.

But something about our encounter must have set off the Smoking Priest, because after about five minutes, and for the first and only time I ever witnessed, he came out of the office and made a bee-line for my chair. Planting himself belligerently in front of me, he barked,

“I don’t see it on the commissary sheet.”

Sometimes, with new items they just stuck them in the window until they got a chance to reprint the sheets. Sometimes it took them a year or more to reprint the sheets. Having worked there for going on twenty years, it was likely that he knew that. Then, again, given his general level of functioning on most days, maybe not.

“It was in the window.”

“I’m going to check on that.”

Good Lord, man, please do. It was way too early in the morning to have to keep crossing wits with the unarmed.

He retreated to the smoking lounge. I went to work, thoroughly enjoying being able to keep the chill away from my larynx so that I could join in singing with the other happy inmates on the bus ride.

Over the next few months I spent many hours in the dish room, at one time or another performing every one of the
available tasks. But I always maintained a soft spot in my heart for dish catching. It’s where I simply felt I belonged the best. There is a warm sense of being involved in the birth process, even if it is only a tray.

THE CAFÉ FLORENCE

I thought about titling this chapter The Chez Florence, but somehow I always associate a restaurant with Chez in its name as being at least partly good. I think it’s one of those marketing tricks that have typically worked on me, for no good reason. In contrast, I have eaten at many cafes that couldn’t have hit “good” on a four-foot target with a biscuit from two feet. So Café Florence it is.
When I first arrived at Florence Prison Camp I was told a few things by the inmates. Since the COs seemed more invested in a general disinformation campaign with new inmates, I had learned that it was my fellow incarceree who proved to be by far the more reliable sources. And so, I was told repeatedly that “this place may suck in just about every way, but the food here is great.” For the first few weeks my level of shock was such that I couldn’t have cared less. I ate enough to survive and tried to avoid anything on my plate that was faster crawling off than I was at stabbing. But then I began to settle in and pay closer attention. This was one of those areas where ignorance truly was bliss.

I should point out at this juncture that I am something of a cook, at least as one of my preferred hobbies. I do more than ninety percent of the cooking in my relationship and enjoy few things more than spending all day planning and executing a multi-course meal, complete with probably poorly matched wines. This is not cordon bleu level stuff, but neither is it extracts from One-Pot Dishes Using Campbell’s Soup. So I admit that I was looking at the Café Florence cuisine with a bit more than a survivalist’s eye, particularly once I no longer felt like a survivalist.

As I dialed in I began to notice a certain imbalance in the menu. Other than the ubiquitous beans and rice that were
present at virtually every meal, protein seemed to be a bit scarce. Now you have to understand that there are few things as prized by inmates as protein. I’m not quite sure why that is, but suspect that there is a research study in it somewhere. It may be that an abundance of protein leads to an increase in the kind of marginal antisocial behaviors that can lead to incarceration in our somewhat overly Victorian society. Or it may be that if you lock up five hundred guys and turn weightlifting into one of the center points of their existence, they become a bit more focused on protein intake. Whatever the genesis of the addiction, when coupled with the general “politics of scarcity” model that defines prison camp life, the result is an endless variety of ways that people go about both acquiring and husbanding protein. Had things been a bit more primal, I suspect that might have included foraging for insect larvae.

It started at breakfast. At breakfast each inmate was given two half-pint containers of milk, presumably to go with the cereal. A quick side-note on the cereal. Apparently in an effort to make a therapeutic appeal to our thwarted inner children, there was always a sugary cereal. Often this was something like a BOP-approved generic form of Lucky Chocolate Puff Stars with Dino Bits, or some such. Sometimes it was simply flakes that appeared to have been glazed with a fire
hose. There were several months where this option consisted of stale generic Fruit Loops, probably spelled Frute Lupes in order to protect the copyright. I was sitting at a table with an inmate one morning that turned out to have something of a scientific streak. He commented, seemingly out of the blue while chomping on a mouthful of these hummers, “You know, the birds won’t eat the purple ones.” I wasn’t sure what he was referring to, and could think of several options, some of which bordered on obscene. I raised what I thought was a quizzical eyebrow, but which could have been a behind-the-fence invitation to have a shiv fight in the gym for all I knew. He explained, gesturing vaguely in the direction of his Frute Lupes, “I put a pile of them outside and watched. They ate all the other ones but wouldn’t touch the purple ones.” I looked at my dish more carefully, noting that the purple ones seemed to dominate the mass that was floating in my out-of-date milk. That was the last morning that I ate Frute Lupes.

But there was always a nonsugared cereal option. Sometimes that was in the form of cornflakes from which the taste had been completely removed by a process that was altogether obscure to me. On occasion it was the BOP variant of Cheerios, or Chireeoes, for the same copyright issues. These truly tasted like someone punched them out of leftover boxes in recycling and really didn’t resemble any form of grain with which I am
acquainted. If you piled sugar on them, they had some taste, but then . . .

I find that boredom seems to breed a lot of interest in science, at least based on the casual remarks of my dining partners. Again at breakfast, one of my tablemates commented, while looking at his Chireeoes, “You know, I put two of these on two different anthills, just to see what they would do. I came back a few hours later and they had carefully moved them to the side so that they were out of the way. They didn’t seem to recognize them as food.” After that, I just skipped cereal altogether.

But this started with milk. I don’t drink milk, as a rule. For some reason over the course of my adulthood my milk intake has been totally replaced by coffee, beer, and wine. I have not found that to be upsetting. But if one is focused on protein intake (one might argue to the point of near-obsession) milk is a very prized commodity. Some guys had figured out that if they drank eight and a half pints before noon, they would have met at least a portion of what they believe their daily protein intake needed to be.

I had one meal mate in particular who was highly focused on this project. I started calling him the Milk Godfather. At each breakfast a stream of people would come by our table, dropping off their excess milks with a whispered “For you, Don
Corleone.” He was built like a blockhouse and I presumed there was some low-grade protection service being rendered on the other end of this process. I never asked, or really wanted to know. After about fifteen minutes he would have about ten milks stacked in front of him. After downing four, he would begin the process of trying to figure out how to get these milks out of the dining room and back to his cubicle, where they could be put on ice and consumed at greater leisure. This was not nearly as simple as it sounds. It was expressly against policy to take anything out of the dining room except one piece of fruit, and that only according to the whims of whatever CO was on duty. So milk containers had to be stuffed in any available shirtfront pocket and smuggled from the dining room. To do so, only had to run the gauntlet of Eliot Ness and the Milk Untouchables, who, knowing that there was active milk-smuggling going on (not to mention the “muling” of milk for others) were ever on the alert. As my friend neared the end of his breakfast he would start shooting furtive glances around the area, trying to locate the whereabouts and projected trajectories of any COs. In addition to his doctorate in math he had more than an average knowledge of physics, which, presumably, included the mapping of sub-atomic particles. I assumed that was the inspiration behind the tracings he made on the napkins depicting the movements of the COs in the milk patrol. Once he had reached the optimal
configuration he would bolt for the door, occasionally right into the arms of the extra CO who was standing outside the exit door and shaking down each exiting inmate looking for exiting milk. We affectionately referred to that CO as the Milk Nazi. Most of us agreed that this activity seemed at least as important as finding Bin Laden.

Nor were the COs’ attentions solely confined to milk. I mentioned that the rules allowed us to take one piece of fruit out of the dining hall. Of course, this rule was interpreted differently by each CO, and it was common practice to later confiscate this fruit from people’s lockers during shakedowns. After all, you don’t want uncontrolled fruit consumption going on in prison. It might lead to health.

I ran afoul of this particular rule ambiguity with a raisin. On rare occasions we would get this granola in the mornings that had raisins in it. Lord knew how old it was, but the raisins were not unlike gravel on the hardness scale, falling in a new category somewhere between corundum and diamond. After having attempted to masticate these things unsuccessfully for months, I got curious. After all, I have my own scientific bent. I wanted to see if one would actually rehydrate under the proper, or any, circumstances. So I took one from the dining hall. I took it to my cube and put it in a pill bottle, with about a half ounce of water. That night I was
watching a basketball game when some CO decided it was time to do a massive shakedown of our wing, presumably because they had run out of oranges or apples in the COs’ office. After they let us back in I went to my cube to inventory the losses. They had taken my raisin. I tried to imagine them standing there looking at this thing, trying to figure out why someone would have put a rat turd in water in a pill bottle. If they got so far as realizing it was a raisin (and not knowing their chemistry) they probably thought I was trying to make a shot of hooch, all one-half ounce of it. Who knows. So my experiment got derailed before it ever got off the ground. I eventually simply gave up on the granola, choosing in favor of keeping all of my teeth.

After observing the way that the concern about protein seemed to negatively affect the quality of life of many of those around me, I decided to see if I could live a near-protein free existence. That made me extremely popular with at least one guy who decided to latch onto me at all meals, hoping to catch the loose, unmarked protein that seemed to gravitate naturally off my lunch tray. I doubted that it was because he particularly enjoyed my company, as I became increasingly nonverbal and cognitively dulled over the course of my incarceration.

But if following the Atkins Diet was out, one could always default to carbs. The last time I saw so many different ways to present carbs as fine cuisine was when I was traveling in
certain quasi-third-world countries where one of the local cooks
told me cooking-wise they just had fourteen different kinds of
potatoes. So I decided to do a mental shift. I would take my
meal, close my eyes and play off an association from one of the
things on my plate. If what I was looking at was a strange
variant of a crisped potato thing, I imagined it becoming
Chicken Kiev, replete with stuffed asparagus. Mac and cheese
became alfredo, with bacon, sun-dried tomatoes, and capers. The
casserole de jour became . . . well, it stayed scary, whatever
it was, and I simply pushed it toward the protein junky whenever
it appeared. All in all, it made for a much more varied
cuisine, one that I internally labeled Florence Fusion.

Since this approach worked reasonably well, I decided to
extend it to the Kool-Aid as well. There were four faucets
dispensing different kinds of punch, that is, until the machine
broke and it all morphed into one container with one kind of
punch, presented intermittently. In my mind I turned them into
various wines that I found myself missing. Lemonade became
riesling; the other completely unidentifiable white punch became
chardonnay; the fruit punch, gamay beaujolais; and the grape,
cabernet. It worked wonderfully, that is until I realized that
the constant abdominal cramping I was experiencing seemed
directly related to these punches. After that, my virtual wine
went the way of the cereal.
After a while I realized that my diet consisted primarily of carbs, sugar, water, with occasional supplements of grease and salt. Of course, there were the ever-present canned vegetables that had been cooked for hours. They must have had something in them that still contributed to the food pyramid. And there were meats. After the first few months I adopted the general rule of not eating anything that iridesced. I decided to balance all this the same way the other inmates did, by buying things at commissary and eating out of my locker. Of course there was some risk there as well. On occasion the COs would tell the inmates working in the commissary to use their pencils to erase the “sell by” dates on things like the potato chips, so that they could keep shoveling them out to the inmates. But it was easy to eat out like that, although that twelve cent-an-hour income was something of a barrier. That and two daily vitamins about did it. I lived.

The balance of the diet was not the only issue that set the Café Florence apart from other fine dining establishments. For openers, you simply couldn’t beat the ambiance.

Meals were served at three set times during the day. Since there were about five hundred inmates at an average in the camp, and only about one hundred and fifty chairs in the dining room, it was rather important that not all inmates attempt to sit down at the same time. This meant that the procedure involved
standing in fairly long (and slow) lines outside of the dining hall for fifteen to thirty minutes before each meal. The line wasn’t a particular issue; after all, the meals were supposedly the high point of the camp. But there were a couple of other line-related issues that tended to detract from the experience.

To begin with, the bulk of the line was outside, snaking around the outside of the dining hall. In the summer this wasn’t a particular problem, as it gave you a chance to catch up on the camp gossip and gave one of the COs a chance to make sure you had a soft-shoe permit if you were wearing tennies. When first asked this I was very tempted to throw my best Astaire imitation at him. You had to have diabetes to get one of these permits, so virtually everyone was stuck wearing their ill-fitting boots, at least to meals. It was high entertainment for some of the COs to catch the guys who tried to end-run this requirement. And this camp was in Colorado, in full view of Pike’s Peak. Pike’s Peak is fourteen thousand feet high. In the winter it tends to be cold when near fourteen thousand-foot mountains. Ergo, it tended to be cold in the camp during the winter. At times this meant really, really cold. The area is also noted for its shifting and ever present winds during much of the year. Coupled with the cold and you had a near-lethal combination of wind-chill factors that at least distracted one from the issues of appetite. It’s hard to care if you eat when
you are breaking the ice cubes out of your moustache. Then there was the smell.

“Holy crap, what’s that?” I heard from a guy behind me on one of my first days. It was a testament to the penetrating force of the odor that I knew immediately what he was talking about.

“It ain’t holy,” another guy responded.

These days it’s become kind of cutesie for restaurants to create a décor outside of their establishment, presumably so that diners are kind of eased into the dining experience as they wait in line to be seated. I think they took the idea from Disneyworld, where it seems like as much attention is paid to the pre-ride experience as to the ride itself. Well, someone at the Café Florence had obviously studied this marketing model because the line for chow snaked right next to what we all assumed was the overtaxed camp septic system. We later found out that it was probably the overtaxed large industrial kitchen grease trap, but the olfactory impact was the same. It caused thoughts of the upcoming meal to take a back seat to thoughts of what was threatening to become the last upcoming meal. In fact, we assumed that it was part of a larger cost-containment strategy.

After thirty minutes in line simply trying to keep the prior meal in place, one wasn’t inclined to complain much about
any future offering. If you think about it, this makes a certain amount of sense in terms of explaining the high regard for camp cuisine. It’s like a psychological rebound effect. After being encouraged to imagine eating sewage, the finally proffered alternative tended to look really good.

For those who hung in there, the alternatives were always at least interesting, in a morbid sort of way. It took a while to figure them out because, well, they didn’t make any sense. For example, on most mornings there was some sort of sweet roll that was available for people who wished it. Of course, it was usually frozen, presumably to help keep up the dental referrals. And there were the two cereals, one of which, as you have already learned, was sugared. Then there was bread, whether or not the toaster was working. It was the combinations allowed that were a bit weird. You could select the sweet roll, but only if you took the sugared cereal. If you took the unsugared cereal you had to take the bread. I guess the theory was rather than balancing your intake of sweets, if you were stupid enough to go for the sugar on your cereal, you were going to Hell anyway, so take the sweet roll. Similarly, on those occasional days when there were eggs, you couldn’t take bread for toast unless you took the hardboiled rather than the fried egg. The fried egg only went with the sweet roll. I guess the theory was the same. In for a little, in for a lot. There’s no point in
dying in installments. Of course, there were always readily available sugar or sweetener packets for either cereal. So – you could take the unsugared cereal, sugar it up, then take the toast, or take the sugared cereal, the sweet roll, and trade the sugar packets for someone’s bread, or – just about any combination was possible, except a fried egg and bread for toast. In two years, I never cracked that one.

Now the toaster was a trip in and of itself. There were these two industrial toaster rotisserie things, where you stuck your toast on a tray and it went through this conveyor-belt like apparatus, emerging from the bottom either nicely browned, or burned black. It seemed to take several minutes to go through this machine and on my duller and more obtunded mornings it seemed to take so long that I assumed it was looping through a dimensional warp. And occasionally there was someone who would decide to butter his toast before putting it in this machine. This seemed like a great idea, in a pre-thought, pre-coffee sort of way, but upon any reflection one could see that it had disaster written all over it. Halfway through the cycle smoke would start pouring out of the machine as it tried to ignite a grease fire with the butter. The machine would then have to be unplugged and abandoned until cleaned, which, on occasion, took a month or two to accomplish.
Then there was the marking of the toast. With five hundred guys using the same toasters in a steady stream, it was rather easy to get one’s toast mixed up with someone else’s. And if there is one thing you didn’t want to do it was touch another inmate’s food. According to widely held local mores, food touched by someone else became immediately inedible and had to be abandoned. So each person developed a system of toast-marking, so that as the pieces emerged, you would know which one was yours. This was a great idea, except there were only about four marking strategies that people seemed to utilize. There was the “Biting Off One Corner” strategy. This had the problem of orientation, unless one could remember exactly how one put the toast in the tray. But the tray had also changed orientation as it went through the machine, so it was something of a complex geometrical exercise figuring out how it should be pointed when it finally dropped out. Then there was the “Biting Off Two Corners” strategy (my personal favorite) – same downside. The “Poke a Hole in it With a Finger” strategy had some popularity, although toasting caused expansion and tended to close the hole, requiring the person to look and quickly identify a seemingly appropriate toast scar. There was a decided advantage if the scar took on an image of the Blessed Virgin. That was worth about eight stamps. Sometimes the machine took matters into its own hands and utilized the “Mangle
it Beyond All Recognition” strategy, at times coupled with the “Self-Ignition” strategy. The inedible result was not highly prized.

After getting a meal one went to sit at one of the four-man tables to eat. When I first got to the camp, it looked to me like there was a racial division in evidence in the dining room. But I wasn’t firing on all cylinders for the first week and decided I must have had that one wrong. Then I completed the journey and realized I had it right the first time. Now I’m sure I could have sat anywhere, especially after a few months, but somehow it just wasn’t the way things were done. The Black guys sat mostly at the Black tables; most of the Hispanic guys sat at the Hispanic tables, and the Asian, White, Native, Middle Eastern, and Indo-European guys sat in various other pockets. It wasn’t a firm set-up, but breaking the unwritten rules just created a low level of discomfort for everyone. What made it more interesting was that the whole camp was integrated to a high degree. All the recreational and work activities brought folks into close contact with each other on a continuous basis, and everyone generally got along with everyone. Speaking generally, most of the time it was probably more successfully integrated than the outside world. But this was also a camp. By all reports, behind the fence (as the higher security settings are known) is a very different story.
I had a friend who got carted off to a county jail for about four months on a writ. This happens occasionally to guys who have plea-bargained, and is one of the downsides of being one of the ninety-nine percent of the inmates who ended up accepting such a deal. Of course, they usually do so trying to avoid bankrupting themselves by going to trial, and to avoid having their sentences tripled by overzealous and uncontrolled prosecutors who are annoyed about actually being forced to prepare for a trial. It should be noted that because of the above, belief in one’s guilt or innocence has little to do with the decision to accept a plea bargain, and those who decide to go to trial form a very small sub-set of inmates.

My friend was a very tall, very white accountant. When he first hit the county jail and was given a meal, he took it to an empty table and sat down. After a moment, a Black guy showed up and said “you can’t sit here; you’re not Black.” No argument there. So he moved to another empty table. After a moment a Hispanic guy came up to him and said, “You can’t sit here – you’re not Hispanic.” Right again. He ended up in his cell eating alone. After a few days of this, a Native American inmate came up to him and said, “We voted – you can sit with us.” It appeared that the Natives were simply more used to unwanted immigrants; they’ve had a lot of experience.
So, sometimes one did have to pay attention to such things, especially if you hoped to get extra milks.

As in all things, you tended to gravitate to certain people with whom you spend lots of time, including most of your meals. This led to many opportunities for gossiping and general complaining, which are the core activities among inmates. Lord knows, the BOP provides an endless supply of material.

One of my favorite exchanges occurred in the morning with a guy who had this voice that sounded like he was scraping marbles around the inside of a cheese grater. Over the course of the week he had been attending inmate pre-release classes. These are activities sponsored by the BOP where either staff or enlightened external entities expound upon things like finding an apartment, getting a job, balancing a checkbook, finding appropriate spiritual guidance, or how mutual funds are the best and only safe investment strategy. This last one was a hard sell, as this was during the financial meltdown when people were watching their mutual fund returns fall about five percent a day. Still, as I was told by a friend who had considerable finance background, that was better than the prior year’s presentation at another camp where the presenters were hawking a product that had since been determined to be illegal.
Anyway, the raspy guy had been suffering through a number of these meetings and they were clearly on his mind. He commented, in a very reflective tone,

“‘I’ve been thinking about what that guy was saying last week at the presentation . . .’”

There was a long pause, as he clearly weighed the information carefully.

“. . . and I ain’t doin’ any of that shit.”

Fool me once, as the saying goes.

In addition to critical commentary of BOP presentations, meal gatherings also gave one a chance to observe some very interesting things. This struck me particularly one breakfast as three of us sat down to address the eating of a grapefruit.

When I was a child we had a grapefruit bush in our backyard, so this item was a staple at many of our breakfasts. And we had a particular way of approaching the task. I had always assumed that this was the “correct” way to eat a grapefruit and hadn’t really considered just how varied the approaches could be. So this morning three of us approached our half-grapefruits and I was intrigued by the result. There were three very different backgrounds represented in this exercise. One was an economist, one an engineer, and my own tendencies run toward philosophy and psychology. My approach is rather simple. You pick it up and wring it dry into a spoon, drinking each
spoonful of juice that you can extract. This was something of a challenge in this case, because these hummers had been frozen and were about as juicy as the cardboard Chireeoes. Once desiccated, the fruit is then gouged out and ingested which, absent the grapefruit spoons of my youth, was a bit of a challenge. I should also note that I always sprinkle sugar on it first, to take some of the bite out of the juice.

The engineer saw this sugar part of the routine and visibly blanched. This is someone who was very precise about dietary matters and the idea of eating sugar in any form was almost painful for him. Watching my ruining of a grapefruit in this manner probably came near to causing the coronary that he has been studiously avoiding for years. In fact, it was probably noting his covert response to my sugaring exercise that caused me to pay attention to this whole process in the first place.

His own approach fascinated me. Using only a dull plastic knife, he carefully excised every particulate of the meat of the grapefruit, clearly thoroughly enjoying each bite. When it was over I felt like I had watched a surgical procedure executed by a master. His grapefruit shell was pristine, containing not one random particle of fruit. It looked like it had been sandblasted. I looked down at my own shrapnel and felt like I was about five years old. Mine looked like it had lost a battle with an eggbeater. I could almost feel it reproaching me from
the plate. Looking for some solace, I shot a glance over at the economist to see how he was doing. Somehow, while I had been focused on the engineer’s dissection process, the economist had managed to accumulate four other grapefruits in front of him. It made sense; I decided he must have worked as a banker.

For all meals, the whole dining room was set up cafeteria style, with one central area for the dispensing of the main dish and an island down the center where the packet of sauce and side dishes were housed. There was a large silver tray located at the beginning of the island where inmates threw the parts of the meal that were given to all but that they personally found unappealing. On many days that tray filled up very quickly. Further down the island there was always the usually-mostly-green salad, with some form of dressing, then the ever present beans. One day, as I was going down this line, I saw that one of the helpers had made a much-appreciated sign that read “watch for rocks in the beans.” Given the status of dental care at the camp, this was a very helpful warning. Most of the time, it was a clear case of caveat emptor.

As a rule, everyone really looked forward to Hamburger Wednesday. It was a time when we were given a soda to drink, hamburgers with the fixings, and a small container of ice cream. At least when I first reached the camp we all looked forward to it. Over time we all noticed that the hamburgers were getting
progressively smaller, the sodas disappeared, and the other extra aspects of the meal were being concomitantly reduced. So, many turned their attention to Chicken Thursday. There, we started with these rather sizeable chicken breasts. But, here, too, we watched them turn into these odd-looking leg-thigh combinations that revealed strange black dotted sections inside them when subjected to closer inspection. We also were following the news about salmonella outbreaks that caused the massive nationwide destruction of chickens and noticed that our own chicken consumption increased dramatically shortly thereafter. So we shifted our attention to Fish Friday. But the translucent fish things that tended to lie in this limp form of protest in one’s dish made that meal one of the least attended during the week.

To be fair, I must put this in perspective. To a person, anyone who spent any time in another camp, higher-security prison, or county jail had no tolerance for any complaints. They made it very clear that we had no idea just how bad food could be. As in all things in life, this was clearly a relative issue. And I found that thought a particularly dispiriting one. But it also occurred to me that the COs were considerably less discriminating in this regard. Many of them ate at our meals, particularly during lunch. Apparently this was expected, as there was a machine on the wall in which they were supposed to
insert their ID cards so that they could charged for this, since it didn’t appear to be considered a tax-payer-supported perk. Of course, the machine didn’t work and was stuck on an error reading that said “Code 67” the entire time I was there, so perhaps it was a perk after all. If so, it was of uncertain value. Shortly before my discharge about half the camp was leveled by food poisoning when one of the COs in charge in the kitchen left the chicken out overnight before serving it as a leftover the next day. The camp generally ground to a halt, and when the inmates could stop vomiting they took some solace in the fact that any COs who had shared their lunch were also absent from work.

So we just moved through our weeks, riding the food train from Hamburger Wednesday, to Chicken Thursday, to Fish Friday, and beyond. Some inmates even marked their time by how many Hamburger Wednesdays they had remaining in their sentences. Food, no matter the quality, was simply one of the central issues of camp life.

The Café Florence was also a major source of inmate employment. When you have about five hundred inmates and it only takes about twenty people to run a camp, there tends to be a lot of piecework available. This is particularly true in the kitchen. At any given meal there was one guy whose job it was to hand each inmate pieces of bread. Talk about mind-numbing.
In fact, there were a large number of these kinds of very
discrete tasks. But one of the most coveted jobs at the camp
for many people was napkin rolling.

This was actually a fairly complicated task. It involved
two distinct steps. First the person had to take one of each
utensil (knife, fork, and spoon), then he had to wrap it in a
napkin. Most of the guys over sixty were assigned to this task,
particularly if they had medical problems, which took in about
everyone over sixty. There was the notable exception of the guy
who had been assigned to rake rocks, whom I affectionately
called The Rake Master, and whose story will take temporary back
stage for the Saga of Tony Two-Fork.

Tony was from Philly. Now he was from Philly, not
Philadelphia – Philly, and he sounded like it. He had that kind
of rapid-fire intensity that, while endemic to that region,
seems so out of place in the languid and laconic West. Nor did
Tony suffer fools all that well. And since most of the staff
gave every appearance of being foolish on a regular basis, Tony
spent a lot of his time not suffering. In fact, Tony made it
quite clear that their power over him began and ended with the
fact of his incarceration. He was smart enough to know that he
couldn’t openly disobey the rules, lest he end up on a short
ride to the hole. But he was also smart enough to know that if
he was passive-aggressive enough he could avoid doing much of
anything, and he lacked any shame about taking that approach. And so he became Tony Two-Fork.

Since he basically refused to expend any real energy in the service of the BOP he was assigned to what they took to be the least challenging task – napkin rolling. But shortly after he began that assignment, people started noticing that when they unrolled their napkins, they might have two spoons and a knife, or a fork and two knives – just about any combination was possible. Closer inspection solved this mystery in short order. As he sat cheerfully chatting with colleagues, Tony was observed simply grabbing a handful of plastic silverware and rolling it up, paying no attention to the details. That was classic Tony and henceforth and forever, he was Tony Two-Fork. Not that anyone was going to hassle him about it. One had the sense if you were still looking for Jimmy Hoffa, Tony could probably help you out.

It was while sitting in the dining room one day, wondering why there had been no spoon in my napkin and trying to eat my soup with a fork, that I looked outside and noticed the Rake Master.

The Rake Master was a man of about sixty-five who could be seen most days walking slowly around the stark, desert like landscape that comprised the camp’s lawns, dragging a six-foot-wide rake. It was never clear exactly what he was doing this
for, other than it was his job assignment. There were several things about this image that were striking. First, it brought scenes of the *Grapes of Wrath* to mind, as it just had that kind of Depression-era feel to it. Second, was the cane that he held in his right hand. As I got to know this gentleman I discovered that the situation was considerably odder than it even appeared. He was an investment banker, despite the long pony tail that hung to the middle of his back and that didn’t exactly look like boardroom attire. He had a seriously screwed up hip, and needed the cane to keep from falling over. So, with an eye to appropriate job placement, the BOP took this sixty-five year-old quasi-invalid and had him pulling a twenty-pound rake around a wind-blown desert compound, with one hand because he needed the other to ensure that he remained upright. He did this for several hours a day.

I also learned that he was a devout Buddhist and discharged this duty with an attention to excellence. He would purposely create intricate patterns in a Zen-like fashion, using only the teeth of the rake. Of course, these were immediately blown away by the wind, thus reinforcing the ephemeral nature of all life. He would then re-create them, only to watch them be washed or gusted away. There was symmetry to it. He spent the day creating and recreating order from chaos, in an environment where no one noticed. It was his way of making his time
timeless. Then, in the evening, he would take a bunch of Advil and try to sleep.

After about a year, I had been exposed to just about every meal that could possibly be produced from the bowels of the Café Florence. Actually, I think I achieved that in about two weeks, but it took a year for the depressing realization to sink in. I was ready to move on. I now understood why there was so much microwave cooking going on. I also understood why they sold a range of sauces through the commissary. Of course, one wasn’t supposed to bring those sauces up to the meals, a rule that was enforced about every six months. I did, however, try on numerous occasions to bring a small bottle of parmesan cheese in an attempt to make the Italian offerings a bit more palatable. That proved to be something of a mistake.

Perhaps as a result of an infection induced by the camp water, or maybe just due to the kind of brain damage that occurs when you work for an agency like the BOP for an extended length of time, the security rules kept getting more and more bizarre as my time went on. And it also seemed like they were enforced differently by COs in an inverse relationship to their height. In an effort to prove once and for all that there is such a psychological condition as the Napoleon Complex, it was the really short COs who tended to approximate the largest alimentary openings. It got to the point where they were making
us present IDs as we left out living unit, stood in line for chow, and as we left the chow hall after meals. Often these interventions were accompanied with the ubiquitous camp pat-down, presumable in quest of sauces or other commissary items that we might be muling into our meals. Why they ID’d us leaving our living units remained a complete mystery, since it seemed highly unlikely that the residents of the local town would have broken into these units for free room and board. But check us they did – incessantly.

On one occasion I was accosted by a CO as I left the dining hall. I heard this voice from somewhere around my kneecap and was able to find him without too much effort. I assumed the now-familiar airplane position, holding my bottle of parmesan cheese in my hand. I wouldn’t have wanted him to think I was hiding it in my pocket with my ouzi. He must have been headed into the spaghetti dinner himself because he immediately barked.

“What’s in the bottle?”

“Parmesan cheese.”

There was a close inspection and careful shaking of the bottle. Apparently having determined that there was no razor blade hidden in the cheese, he asked,

“Is this contraband?”

“No,” said I, feeling confident in my response.

“Why not?”
There were several ways to answer this. For example, “Well, having contraband is a bad thing, so I don’t carry it.” Another would have been, “Why would it be contraband, it’s cheese for Chrissakes?” Or “Do you want it to be?” (to which the answer was clearly “yes.”) Or “What’s contraband?”

I chose the simple answer - “Because I bought it at the commissary.”

He visibly swelled with potential importance, cresting almost five feet as he did so. I think he sensed a teaching moment. Actually he sensed an opportunity-to-threaten moment.

“Let me explain something to you.” (Pray do.)

“It’s contraband because it isn’t in its original container.”

I had transferred some from its original huge bottle (purchased at commissary) into an empty multivitamin bottle (also purchased at commissary). Had I brought the whole bottle, it would have undoubtedly been confiscated, thus meeting the culinary needs of a whole host of COs, rather than just this one. Come to think of it, that could have been the point. In his defense, I should point out that technically he was correct. It was simply something that was rarely enforced, because even the most brain dead of the COs knew it was an idiotic rule.

All of this was internal. My external response was “OK.” I am educable.
“So don’t be bringing that up here again,” this uttered as he took it and looked toward the door where dinner was waiting. “OK.”

I had apparently escaped being taken to the hole on a parmesan writ, but there was always tomorrow. The menus said “burritos” and I had a pill bottle of Cactus Annie’s Salsa just waiting.

With the lurking threat of these kinds of encounters always in the background décor of the Café Florence, and the very real impact of the Florence Fusion cuisine on my GI system, I made a mental pact with myself. Should I ever decide to not commit a crime again and get sent to prison as a result, I’m going to disinter my mother and ask her if she would be willing to whip me up about two years worth of sack lunches.

Excerpts from the Eat Your Way To Freedom Cookbook

Alferd Packer Meatloaf

Some of you may be familiar with Colorado’s most famous cannibal. He has been memorialized in various locations throughout the state, including the student grill at the
University of Colorado at Boulder. There were kidding. We weren’t.

About once every three weeks we were served something called “meatloaf,” to which It bore a loose resemblance, kind of like an H-bomb resembles a cherry bomb. Something had been ground up and was somehow being glued together with some nonspecific adherent. There, the similarity ended. It tended to have alternating green and pink stripes, which for some reason I found frightening. And it was smothered in a red sauce that was most likely tomato-based, although solely relying on taste, I was never sure. After a while I began to think that the meatloaf was somehow related to the near obsession they displayed in counting us. After all, the guards also ate in our chow hall and probably knew more about the ins and outs of kitchen operations than any of us generally ill-informed inmates. Perhaps they were trying to figure out which nights to skip. Here’s the recipe that falls in the best-guess category.

2 bags Savage Sally’s oatmeal derivative
Parsley (this is more hopeful than knowledge-based)
Salt - lots
Pepper - perhaps
3 tubes of Elmer’s wood glue (since that has a more culinary appearance than the regular form)
Several cans of Savage Sally’s Tomato Sauce (we hoped)
Missing Mike
Florence Frappe

The Café Florence gained a reputation for its stellar coffee, the kind that made one longingly anticipate the coffee available from the vending machines in the visiting room on visiting day. Despite much analysis, we were never able to actually figure out how they butchered the coffee so badly. This was our best effort to reproduce the recipe, using available resources.

1 reusable coffee filter, doubling as a large tea bag in the afternoons

10 scoops Random Ralph’s dehydrated, partially hydrogenated, permanently freeze-dried coffee extract

3 gallons semi-stagnant pond water

Mix
Heat to tepid
Let stand

The truly adventurous would smuggle in expired cinnamon that had been liberated from the kitchen stores, partly in an effort to cut through the faintest of aging sweat sock lint that seemed to permeate the mixture, for completely unfathomable reasons.

Savage Sally’s Savory Soup
Soup was a staple in the Café Florence Fusion model. As the week progressed, there were undoubtedly many things that simply did not get completely consumed. Sometimes this was a planning issue, but most of the time it simply suggested good judgment on the part of the inmates. As a consequence, there was always a day for the catch-up soup. Rather than looking for complementary flavors in the creation of this soup, the goal was more modest. Once made, there should be no containers in the kitchen labeled “leftover.” Here is a typical rendition. It may have been the one that caused the ptomaine outbreak that laid out over half the camp just before I left.

- Chopped polish sausage
- White beans
- Carrots, sliced
- Red beans
- Carrots, chopped
- Pork and beans
- Celery, chopped
- Black beans
- Kidney beans
- Chicken pieces, possibly
- Green beans
- Tomatoes
- Bar-b-que beans
- Salt, pepper, spices, nondescript
- Water
- Water
- More water
As I said, after Hamburger Wednesday went south, we turned out eyes to Chicken Thursday, which started out with great promise. As long as no one looked at the date on the package and had at least four remaining teeth that met, the chicken looked pretty good. Then, as with all good things in the Café Florence, it started to spiral downhill. One could almost hear Julia Child crying, “Oh, noo, noo, noo . . .” as she waved a cleaver at the camera. The eventual approximation to shoe leather wasn’t in and of itself a big deal, but the appearance of the black spots intermingled with the uncooked portions started to give a lot of us pause. Trying to cut them out wasn’t really successful, as at the end on was left with more holes than chicken. After considerable speculation and much sweating of the cooks, we finally got to the bottom of it, and realized it really was just a recipe issue. Combining the results of all our interviews, here’s the recipe that emerged.

Chicken, lightly dusted with ground up mortar from the interminable sidewalk scraping
Sautéed bird poop, from the same source
Salt and pepper
Salt and pepper
Salt
LEARNING SPANISH

I decided that if I was going to be living in an environment where about fifty percent of the people were Spanish-speaking, it was silly not to try to learn the language. After all, my post-discharge plans involved fleeing the country in a southern direction as fast as legally possible. I’d also
tried several times in the past to learn Spanish, although my previous efforts had been largely confined to ordering at Mexican restaurants and saying “Buenos días” or “Buenas tardes” to various wait staff at Mexican resorts. The only time I had tried to give directions in a Mexican taxi, I hadn’t recognized our destination when we arrived. So I went looking for a tutor.

I found a very nice gentleman who had been raised in El Paso, Texas and whose post-discharge plans sounded much like mine. Except I wasn’t sure which Central American country I was going to end up in and he had already settled on Central Mexico. After comparing notes it was sobering to realize that the two of us, with our very different backgrounds, shared the same level of fear and loathing about our country in its current manifestation. I think our government is missing a bet. If we really want to solve the immigration issue all we need to do is fully inform the public about what we really do in our judicial system. They should scare off just about anyone. Anyway, I started spending about an hour a day walking the track with Jorge, attempting to carry on conversations in Spanish. I was learning, albeit very slowly, when he threw down the gauntlet.

“Tu necesitas mirar novelas.”

“Novelas?”

“Si, novelas.”

“Que estan novelas?”
So far so good. He had told me I needed to watch novelas and I was successfully probing for more information.

“Novelas estan en la television.”

I was closing in. A few more questions and I had it. Novelas are the Mexican equivalent of soap operas, with their own twist. Instead of running for an entire adult lifetime, they only run for a few months and they are a huge source of entertainment in Mexico. Jorge told me that one of fastest ways to learn Spanish is to watch soap operas, a technique he had used to learn English.

So, novelas it was. Now in our camp there was a Spanish TV room in our living unit, usually occupied by some of the one hundred and fifty or so Hispanic guys who lived there. A few seemed to live in the TV room itself. There were about fifteen chairs, so there was an immediate resource hurdle.

I should point out that chairs are a very big deal in prison. Actually, they are one of the biggest deals. Early on you learn that getting a chair in a TV room is no mean feat and that all chairs (as well as the squares upon which they sit) have primary occupiers. Failing to understand that can have very negative consequences. The situation is really quite formalized. If someone entered a TV room to find his chair occupied, the occupier was expected to immediately relinquish his seat and go elsewhere. Failure to do so was considered poor
prison etiquette. Discipline typically ranges from some level of social ostracism to something potentially more sinister. And these chairs, as well as their accompanying tiles, can be bequeathed upon the inmate’s release. In the meantime, they can be lent, and it was this that I had to count upon.

Fortunately, the Spanish TV room was a relatively civilized environment and once they realized that I intended to stay for a while, I was quickly adopted into the fold. I identified the novela that I wished to begin watching and was told that the guy who occupied a particular seat was finished with his novela at eight and I could use his chair. That is how I became an aficionado of Soy Tu Duena.

Soy Tu Duena was an immensely popular novela that had been running for a month or two before I dialed in. I have to confess that it was the obvious charms of the star, Lucero, which first drew me across the border. I had no idea at the time that she was a huge star in Mexico, and had been most of her life. At this point, at the age of forty or so, she dominated the screen, not that I could tell what on earth her part was in the plot.

I don’t know if you have ever tried to watch a drama in a foreign language but it is truly an interesting experience. Here I was spending about two or three hours a day either
studying, speaking, or otherwise attempting to learn Spanish, and I was still thoroughly confused for much of the first month. I found that I would recognize words, but mostly in isolation, and then suddenly, for no clear reason, everyone in the room would burst into laughter. I would give a faint smile, just so I didn’t feel left out, but truly had no clue. Then it slowly started to sink in.

You see, Lucero (I mean Valentina) was the lead character and had inherited a huge mansion and estate outside of Mexico City. She was now living there with a bunch of strange people who took turns screaming at or crying with each other. Occasionally things would get really heated and the women would slap the men, but usually that seemed to be a signal of affection, based on the making up that typically occurred shortly thereafter. The primary plot centered on Valentina and Cosa Miguel. It took me almost a week to realize that Cosa Miguel was a person and not the name of a city. This relationship was problematic, primarily because Valentina had been affianced to Alonzo when she was living in Mexico City. Alonzo turned out to be scheming with Valentina’s half-sister Ivana (pronounced Ibana, which means I didn’t get who that was for a week), to try to steal Valentina’s inheritance. For reasons I never understood, Alonzo ended up leaving Valentina at the altar, which meant her trust in men was at an ebb. Now,
Cosa Miguel was this Mexican novela hunk (Fernando Colunga), and I think it was a close-up of his abs that dominated one part of the opening credits. So it was clear that Valentina needed to just get it on with this guy and be done with it. But it was also clear that just about everything that could be thrown in their way was going to be pitched in their direction.

Given all the plot twists and characters, the first few weeks passed in a confusion of words, partially-understood names, and a whole lot of emotional upheaval. Then I started to sort it all out. It helped that I had a consultant. There was one guy who knew that I was floundering, and would review the plot with me every now and then out of pity. I don’t think the general public realizes just how much bonding goes on in prisons around the themes of soap operas. It’s much more important than knife fights.

So Valentina and Cosa Miguel were star-crossed lovers and I was beginning to develop a rooting interest in seeing them work this all out. And, yes, I could tell that I was learning.

After the first few weeks, as I walked the track with Jorge, I ventured,

“Muchos problemas en el ranchero in Soy Tu Duena.”

“Si,” he replied, “muy interesante.”
Well, very interesting might be stretching it a bit, but the plot was starting to occupy my thinking, so maybe I was in denial.

“Mira, Valentina y Cosa Miguel . . .”

I gave him a brief summary while he smiled engagingly. This was a man who had been accosted by the feds while watching Mexican novelas in his house in El Paso, in conjunction with a crime about which he says he knew nothing, I might add, not that that avoided his incarceration for ten years. I used to greet such assertions with skepticism. Then I became a target. Now I just say, “Know what you mean.” Regardless, Jorge knew something about drama and emotional turmoil.

“Tu miras. Tu aprendes mejor poco a poco.”

He was right. As I watched, little by little, I learned.

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Ok, so it was Jose Miguel, not Cosa Miguel. Even after I knew it was Jose Miguel it still sounded like Cosa Miguel most of the time to my untrained ear. Just like Ivana always sounded like Ibana. Ivana turned out to be the lead siren/nut job on the show who was always scheming about how to get Jose Miguel. I suspect part of the attraction was the name pronunciations issue. I also figured Jose Miguel is sort of like Billy Bob in the US, one of those compound name things that always sound wrong unless you live in a particular region.
Anyway, at this point things were really heating up. Let’s see, Jose Miguel and Valentina were on the skids, but she had just slapped him in the last episode so I figured there was hope for their relationship. Alonzo had somehow moved into the ranchero, still having the hots for Valentina. He got himself beaten up by Rosendo, the foreman/lead bad guy who also had the hots for Valentina. There seemed to be a lot of heat directed toward Valentina, but, then, she was Lucero in real life and probably used to it. Alonzo tried the wounded puppy approach and got himself put in Valentina’s ranchero to recover from his injuries which, of course, made Jose Miguel seethe; even though he and Valentina weren’t speaking. A lot of heavy emoting was going on in all directions at all times. But, I was learning.

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“Jorge.”

“Si.”

“With all the stuff flying around I think my brain’s going to explode.” I didn’t know how to say all that in Spanish.

Jorge laughed. “Just be patient.” “Paciente.”

So I watched. I learned. I felt the need for more. At the bottom of the screen there began running a crawling announcement for another novela that was to begin in two weeks – Eva Luna. Did I dare?

“Si.”
So, I was to start this novela at the beginning, which was supposed to keep me from being at sea for quite so long. It kind of worked. It helped that they set this one in LA and occasionally sprinkled in English phrases.

Eva Luna, the lead character, was not really Eva Luna. Her name was Eva Gonzales. Presumably the Luna came from a huge full moon that was prominent in the credits, perhaps as a romantic metaphor. Or maybe she was going to become a werewolf later.

Eva was a SoCal apple picker whose father moved her to LA, along with her sister, who later got hooked up with this mob wannabe who got her kicked out of college. Shortly after the relocation their father was run over and killed by Leonardo (the main bad guy) in a hit-and-run. Leonardo was driving Daniel’s Ferrari. Since Daniel was to become Eva’s love interest, this had the potential of being an issue later, especially since Eva witnessed the accident but only saw the car not the driver.

After failing at a few other menial jobs, Eva became a maidservant to this family that peaked the patholometer at about 120 on a scale of 100. Of course, this put her in the middle of multiple triangulations, the most prominent of which was with Victoria, the daughter of the house and Daniel’s completely
narcissistic fiancée. Victoria was this high-powered model for the family’s advertising/modeling business, which Daniel helped run, along with Marcella, the weird-looking creature who was married to the patriarch and who wouldn’t remove her glove on her left hand for some unknown reason. Perhaps she had a thing for Michael Jackson. Anyway, Victoria (Daniel’s fiancée) was, of course, drop-dead gorgeous, except for this strange protuberance that stuck out from her rear end. It looked like a shelf that you could serve tea on. I thought maybe the show’s costumers were trying to bring back the bustle. She was also almost as whacked out as Ivana in Soy Tu Duena, with rage replacing hallucinations. Both had homicidal tendencies, which seemed to be a novela staple.

Then there was Don Julio, the old patriarch, whose voice sounded like someone was gargling through a fire hose. I didn’t catch all that he said, but he seemed to be the only one with any sense whatsoever. He spent most of his time talking to his dog, which in that household made perfect sense. Rounding out the case was the chauffeur, who convinced this professor he was dating that he was a novela producer and owned his boss’ mansion. But that was OK because she wasn’t really a professor, but a pole-dancer who occasionally hooked in the back room. They were going to get married, but it seemed like there were a few unresolved issues that might crop up.
As with Soy Tu Dueña, there were multiple sub-plots and the style was to switch from one to another in a way that reflected the ADD quality of modern culture.

I started to watch both dutifully every weeknight. If I wasn’t careful, I was going to end up with my own chair.

“Jorge.”

“Si.”

“Eva Luna esta muy bien – muy interesante.”

“Oh, yeah?”

He sounded surprised.

“Si. Mira, Daniel y Victoria y Eva . . .”

Clearly, my resistance was crumbling.

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Soy Tu Dueña

Martes (Tuesday) ---- Jesus, Ivana was as crazy as a loon. One minute she was doing a Lady Macbeth number and seeing ghosts of the people she had killed, and then she was wandering around with a hysterical pregnancy. But at least Chewie was out of the coma. The last Chewie I remember was Chewbacca, but he was an 8-foot carpet. This Chewie was 10 years old, 4-foot, and did rope tricks in the commercials. And what’s her name just kept crying. Every time she was on screen, she was crying. Granted, she was Ivana’s mother, which gave her a lot to cry
about, but enough already. She cried when she was happy; she cried when she was sad; she cried when someone passed her the salt. Hadn’t any of these people heard of therapy? Maybe she was afraid they were going to write her part out of the script. Personally, I think they just needed to kill her off, especially now that she was no longer in prison for the murder she didn’t commit. At least that gave us a point of bonding.

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Viernes (Friday) --- Ohmigod, Rosendo had kidnapped Valentina and was holding her captive in a secret room at the bottom of a mineshaft. No one could find her and now she was getting really, really sick. She wouldn’t drink the milk that Rosendo tried to give her so he drank it. Meanwhile, Ivana threw Benita over the balcony and killed her, confusing her with the ghost of the guy she killed earlier that’s tormenting her. But that’s ok – Gabby and the matador/shopkeeper were getting married, Sandy and the Doc were doing OK, despite Sandy’s completely narcissistic and bonkers mother, and the maid that Rosendo raped before he turned his affections toward Valentina seemed to have recovered and was no longer pushing Timo away. That was a relief.

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The next morning at breakfast my friend sat down. “What kind of a bad guy drinks milk?”
I tried to explain, “He was trying to give it to Valentina, you see she’s really sick and . . . wait a minute, how did you know that?”

“I was walking by the TV room window and I brake for cleavage. I saw him drinking milk. Man, only a pretty lame bad guy drinks milk.”

I decided some people just didn’t have an appreciation for Mexican culture.

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Eva Luna

Miercoles (Wednesday) -- Oh, oh. Leonardo had arranged it so that Eva saw Daniel getting out of the Ferrari that killed her father. They were going to get married the next day but this was putting a serious damper on the marriage plans, as Eva was now catatonic. Of course, Leonard didn’t tell her that he was the one who had been driving the Ferrari at the time. Meanwhile, Marcella killed Don Pablo’s dog. Actually, she was trying to kill Don Pablo but Max, the dog, drank the poisoned tea. This seriously annoyed Don Pablo and he had decided to dial back into a control position in the family. No flies on him.

And Victoria, Daniel’s ex-fiancée, had just trashed his room, while leaving him a note in soap on his mirror reminding
him of their wedding in two weeks, not realizing that Daniel was about to run away with Eva. But Leonardo was working that end.

And poor Carlos, now in jail for getting caught trying to change Alicia’s grades in her professor’s computer, really only trying to help her after she got thrown out of school when Tony threatened to professor.

And what the hell was up with Bruno . . .”

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I went to find Jorge.

“Jorge.”

“Si.”

“Ayuda me por favor.”

“Si, I will help.”

“Las novelas estan completamente whackadoodle.”

“Si, muy interesante.”

“Si.”

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Soy Tu Duena

Lunes (Monday) -- Geez, I thought we’d made it safely through the emotional reefs and were ready to dock. The bad guys (and gal) were dead, everyone was paired off, and the whole town had turned out for Valentina and Jose Miguel’s wedding. It was quite the do and it looked like it was going to be a one-hour novela party. Valentina (being Lucero, a singer in real
life) had even grabbed the mike and delivered a knock-out rendition of a traditional wedding song. Everyone was crying, including the men, even those that hadn’t been slapped lately. I had settled into a warm sense of fiesta and tried to decipher the words to the songs. The scene shifted.

“Kathump.”

It was a close-up of a guy with a wooden leg, shot from the waist down.

“Kathump.”

Clearly he was closing in on something.

“Kathump.”

The scene shifted again and there was Rosendo, the head bad guy, back from his death in the mine explosion, missing a leg, with half his face burned away. He was obviously still obsessed with Valentina because he was not only looking to get slapped again by interrupting her wedding, but he was pointing a gun at her.

The wedding guests held their collective breaths. There was dead silence in the Spanish TV room. But then, Alonzo, Valentina’s ex-fiancé, saved the day by tackling Rosendo from behind. Between him and Jose Miguel they were able to subdue the one-legged Rosendo and he was carted away, only to be incarcerated in solitary confinement a bit later, after he killed his co-conspirator in prison. A lot can happen in five
minutes in a novela. Showing his magnanimity, Alonzo then redirected the wedding party back into song mode and it was a return to fiesta. There followed a series of quick cutaways, wherein several children were born, including two to Valentina and Jose Miguel. The last scene was them sitting on the step of their very modest tryst house, apparently having decided to live and raise their family there instead of in either of the two gorgeous haciendas they owned. That may have been the most unbelievable thing of all. But, at last, Soy Tu Duena was history.

“Jorge.”

“Si.”

“Jorge, yo tengo delor de cabeza.”

“Headache, huh?” A chuckle. “Novelas estan muy interesante.”

“Ciertamente.”

Indeed.
After about a month the dish room had become like a warm cocoon of sanity in my prison existence. It functioned like a lodestar to my ship that frequently felt adrift in the sea of madness that was baseline existence in a prison camp. I knew that at least a portion each day would be spent doing familiar things in a mindlessly repetitive manner. When I look back on it now, it is hard to imagine how anything so completely lunatic could have every settled into feeling normal, but it did. I showed up for work each day on the prison bus, having listened to a fusion of Christian rap music, having negotiated the freezing shoals of the entry process, and having been deemed sufficiently safe to go into the most secure prison in the world (a concept in itself). Thereupon I had performed my requisite tasks with what I hoped was a combination of professionalism and acceptance of my lot. I had become a very proficient dish-catcher and dish-stacker, and could wield a pretty mean squeegee on a floor if required to do so. In short, I was now fully vocationally trained for whatever awaiting me upon my discharge from prison. From here it was simply continuing to refine my skills. Or so I thought. But then it all changed.

“Craaaabe!”
I heard a dim bellow from just outside the dish room door, which either meant that I could barely hear the bellow over the sound of the dish machine or that someone dim had bellowed. I was to find out that it was the latter.

“Craaabe!”

There was a braying quality to the sound, as if someone had kicked a passing donkey in the nuts. I wasn’t sure if it was a call to action or simply a sound of pain.

“Craaabe!”

I left my post, trying to repress my deep concern for the trays that were continuing to disgorge at a rapid rate from the bowels of the dish machine. I noted in passing that the guy across from me got a brief look of panic on his face as he realized that he was going to be overwhelmed very quickly. I think he was a little concerned that the trays might stack up, shut off the machine, and cause another floor show to kick off.

I wandered out the door in what I thought was the direction of the bellow. Franklin, the head kitchen cop was waiting there for me. The bellow seemed to have had his dulcet tones imprinted on it, so I went up to him and stood, dutifully awaiting whatever fate was to be mine.

He looked at me. “I’m changing you to sanitation.”

It was a measure of just how far I had fallen in life that this actually mattered to me a little. I had become attached to
my lowly position as dish-catcher and tray-stacker par excellence and was loathe giving it up. Besides, I had no idea what he was talking about.

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’ll be doing sanitation from now on.”

I had found that asking for clarification from COs in prison is often a complete waste of time. It was kind of like expecting orientation.

“What am I supposed to do.”

“Sanitize.”

Right. Can I start with your right parietal lobe?

Thought, not said.

The COs loved to show you their superiority by not explaining things to you so that they could later criticize your performance against standards that no one but they knew existed. Those standards also changed from CO to CO and sometimes from hour to hour. It was part of the low-grade inmate humiliation tactics that seemed to be a staple of most supervisors in prison settings. It’s how they maintain that air of superiority. Lord knows it’s not through demonstrations of competence.

By now, I was pretty familiar with the importance of not taking any of the innumerable fakes offered up by COs, especially those designed to generate conflict and an inmate response, thus, in turn generating irrational disciplinary
measures. I’d also learned by then that one of the best things an inmate can do is learn to wait. A lot of things that COs got exercised about simply went away if one just waited.

There was a psychological factor at work here that related to the vagaries of power. It is a simple truth that when one is in a situation where he has no real power, there is at least some power to be gained by learning to utilize passive-aggressive techniques. Waiting can be a very passive-aggressive activity, one that is really hard to combat. So there are both healthy and unhealthy reasons to learn to wait in prison. I decided to exercise the healthy ones and simply waited. I figured that eventually he would have to explain my job duties to me if he ever wanted anything to be done. Otherwise, they would have to send me back to the camp eventually, at least by the end of my sentence.

I waited.

He wandered off in another direction. Another thing I noticed is how hard it is for people who are not used to actually working for a living to sustain concentration in the work environment. When you concentrate on a task, if you are not careful it can actually lead to completing it. In the world of COs completing a task risks opening one up to things like performance evaluations, potential criticism, and worse, new and
different tasks. This latter was to be avoided at all costs. So they were typically not opposed to waiting a lot themselves.

So we both waited. I was simply standing in the middle of the kitchen floor at this point, which meant that I was potentially in the way of any of the inmates who were between waiting episodes and the completion of a work task. Since I hadn’t been told to move or do anything, and we were both apparently still in waiting mode, that didn’t look like it was going to change anytime soon. I began to dissociate. Reminding myself again of the importance Siddhartha put on waiting, I put my fingers in the thumb-to-index position well known to meditators and began to count my breaths. Meditation takes many forms, a number of which I have tried to utilize at various times in my life. I called this one the “standing-in-an-industrial-kitchen-trying-to-look-like-an-invisible-tree” posture and kept counting my breaths. To my side I heard a low crashing sound, one that had the suspicious tone of a lot of trays hitting the floor in the dish room. This was followed by the unmistakable sound of inmate obscenities. I felt the boundaries of my body begin to slip into the fuzzy state that accompanies deep relaxation. I considered utilizing the “aum . . aum” mantra, but decided that might be a bit obvious. So I just waited. Time passed . . . or not . . . it was hard to tell.
Franklin slowly gravitated back to my portion of the kitchen. He paused in front of me. Since I had unfocussed, but not closed, my eyes, I could sort of see him observing me speculatively.

“You OK?”

I took a deep cleansing breath and regrasped his version of reality.

“OK is something of a relative term.”

His look was dubious, at best. “Come here.” Like many of the COs, Franklin clearly wasn’t inclined to philosophical musings.

We padded across the kitchen to the wall, where there was a sign. He pointed to it. It had the appearance of a job activity list.

I read the sheet. It was pretty straightforward, although as least one of the things listed suggested machinery that wasn’t really there. But as BOP job lists went, this one was reasonably up-to-date. Franklin left. I was oriented. It was all good.

“... AUM ...”

Now, my new job seemed rather clear-cut on the surface, but had a few features to it that were bound to prove interesting. The one that caught my attention immediately was the part that described doing the floors twice a day. In the world of BOP
kitchen work that meant you threw buckets of soapy water all over the floor, then squeegeed it all to the multiple drain openings that existed throughout the kitchen. I had already had considerable experience with this particular task at the end of the work shift in the dish room. In fact, we all pitched in at the end of the shift and did the whole kitchen each day. The difference was that in my new assignment I was the person responsible for this activity, regardless of whether anyone else joined in, twice a shift. I could handle that. But there were a few things to consider.

The BOP issues all inmates boots that you we were required to wear at our work settings. These are the kind of boots that had pronounced heels and seemed to be specially designed, because they fit no one. You would think that just by chance someone would get boots that fit, but it never seemed to happen. So everyone was always teetering around in boots that don’t fit, and it made them a bit unsteady. More importantly for this setting, they were not slip-proof. This meant that when you attempted to wear them on soapy tile floors it was like putting on ice skates. Slipping and falling were ever-present hazards and a not unknown occurrence in the kitchen. You might think that a setting where there were all sorts of machines, sharp corners, and implements of potential inmate destruction, one might be concerned about having a lot of physically unstable
inmates careering around. But that would assume that our employers actually cared about us at all. The image in my head was like the old Keystone Cops movies where a bunch of guys piled up on each other while trying to turn a corner in chasing the bad guys. In this case we were the bad guys and the Keystone Cops were way too smart (or at least way too experienced) to try to walk very fast on those soapy floors, so we were the ones at risk of doing the piling.

After my first few times through the floor cleaning sideshow, I realized it was only a matter of time before I failed to recover from one of my slip-and-slide near misses and went ass over teakettle. Depending on how I landed, and given that I have some back issues, it might have required a crane to get me vertical again. I decided that perhaps I should attempt to communicate my concern to Franklin, as he was the head kitchen cop. I was pretty sure that we were well beyond the reach of OSHA, so thought maybe I could make my point in a less threatening way.

I approached Franklin.

“May I speak with you for a moment?”

There was a pretty common response one got from COs when you approached them with a request of any kind. It was the “What does this nimrod inmate want?” -- coupled with the “How
can I avoid any responsibility for a decision?” look. I got that look.

“"I’m a little concerned about being on these soapy floors all day. I’ve got a dicey back . . . .”

“You’ll be fine.”

Right.

Now I’d already had several inmates watch me nearly go down on the floors and they had expressed concern that I was going to get killed out there. This was not a completely idle concern. The inmates seemed to realize that being sixty in this situation wasn’t exactly the same as being twenty-five or thirty, and also seemed to be able to conceptualize the notion of workplace accommodation. Franklin was clearly of a different ilk. To him, as with many of the COs I met, there were no old inmates and young inmates, this, in a camp where the inmate age ranged from twelve (based on appearance) to eighty-five (based on obvious infirmity). To the COs, there were only inmates. But I tried anyway. I reached into my vast bag of psychological experience and pulled out what I thought might be a way to get him to begin to grasp the issues. He was about twenty-five, so I said,

“Think of me as your grandfather.”

Franklin paused, and looked at me carefully.

“My grandfather tried to set me on fire.”
I admit, this nonplussed me. It sounded like a pretty personal and potentially serious issue, one that I wasn’t in a position to be of great help with under the current circumstances. It also seemed to take the conversation, such as it was, to a completely different level.

Trying to stay on point, I said,

“Well, then, think of me as a kindly version of your grandfather.”

There was another pause. It appeared I had once again reached the end of Franklin’s attention span and he wandered off, perhaps thinking about giving his granddad a call.

In any case, it didn’t seem that age-related accommodations were going to be high on Franklin’s list, unless it was to consider which kind of fire-retardant might be appropriate to stock.

So I set into my new role as Head Sanitizer in a kitchen that already had the appearance of being sterile in certain areas and a home to a rich and varied plethora of bacteria in others. I decided that the best way to start was to closely examine the list of work activities that were to occupy my week. Each day had a different section of the kitchen listed, making it clear that I was to work my way through the entire area over the course of the week.
At first blush, all the activities seemed to include wiping and cleaning, utilizing an unclear means. Since cleaning was the order of the day, water, soap, and receptacles in which to carry it seemed a first order of business. The head kitchen lady provided me with some feedback in this area. She pointed out two large garbage cans and instructed me to fill one with hot, soapy water for use on the line and other areas where there was the potential to come into contact with food. The other was for hot, soapy water, using a different spigot, for use on the floors. It was apparently important not to confuse the two different soap items, since one was to be used close to the food preparation areas and particularly toxic to humans. But since none of the spigots were clearly marked, I think about half the time the wrong one was being used for the wrong application. Since many things in prison seemed designed to potentially reduce the inmate population, this didn’t surprise me. Over my tour of the sanitation position, I tried my best to keep the two handles straight, but I was often working at five in the morning without good coffee. The best I can say is that, to my knowledge, no one died.

Upon further examining my work list, two things jumped out at me as areas of potentially serious concern. The first was the oven racks and ovens that were to be cleaned weekly. I had seen those oven racks and I was fairly certain that whoever held
this position before me had utilized a semi-millennial cleaning schedule, so I had what I thought was a legitimate question as to whether they could ever be cleaned instead of being simply melted down and recast as bullets for the tower guards. And this was complicated by the fact that they were almost constantly in use during my shift. I don’t know if you have every tried to clean a hot oven, but it is a challenge.

Still, that wasn’t the one that really worried me. It was the range hoods that presented the greatest threat, a task that was to be performed dutifully every Tuesday. Those hoods were your typical stainless steel structures that hung over the two large grills, the deep fat fryers, and the ovens. Those over the grills had about ten years of accumulated grease inside them. It seemed obvious to me that this task also had been avoided by my predecessor, but I was not to be so lucky.

“Craaaabe!”

Franklin’s way of braying my name was starting to sound a bit like someone was in the process of rupturing a lemur. As luck would have it, my first day as Head Sanitizer was a Tuesday. He pointed to the hoods and I was sure I could detect a bit of a smile.

At this point I realized that I had approached the whole grandfather issue in exactly the wrong way. If his grandfather had indeed been fond of trying to immolate his grandchildren,
there was a chance that Franklin had generalized his resulting negative feelings onto anyone with the misfortune of having white hair. Couple that with the strong possibility that sadism and homicidal tendencies have a genetic component and it had the makings of an issue. I thought about suddenly grabbing my back and hobbling over to Franklin, but it would have probably just made him smile more.

“Get up here and do these.”

“Here” in this context was on top of the deep fat fryer, which was not being used at the moment, so that I could reach the inside of the hoods and clean them as directed.

Let me set this scene a bit more clearly. These hoods were about three feet above the grills and fryers. They were about two feet high. To reach inside them, one had to stand on the edge of the fryer, then contort oneself into a pretzel-like shape to be able to reach the inside. Being over six feet tall was not a good thing in relation to this task. It meant that if I stood up close to straight I was hitting the inside top of the hood, not to mention being jacked around in a very bent-over position. To add to the joy of the task, there was about a half-inch of accumulated grease on the edge of the fryer, which gave very little purchase to my specially designed BOP non-nonskid boots. Still, I like to think I’m a gamer and took a shot at it. I thought of trying to stand on the sides of the
deep fat fryer, with its half-inch of grease, but talked myself out of it. I settled on laying a short board across the fryer and standing on it. It was kind of like trying to surf a bucket of marbles. I spent most of my time sliding from one side to the other, only wiping the hoods as I went back and forth. Nor could I push on them because of that Newtonian thing — “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” Pushing would have sent me skidding in the opposite direction until I reached the edge and went airborne. Somehow I managed not to kill myself, although how I didn’t end up slipping and landing on the grill next to the forty pounds of merrily frying rice was beyond me. At the end of that shift I logged “Death-Defying Tuesday” in my mind and vowed that I would take a different approach the next week.

But first, it was back to camp, chow, sleep, and then off to Wednesday, and the ovens.

Trying to make the best of it, I decided to treat this like the aftermath of a very large bar-b-que, one where there had been about ten thousand different guests over a fifteen-year period, generating about forty grills that needed cleaning, each with about a third of an inch of accumulate char on its surface. I began to look around for some chemical that had half a chance of cutting through this stuff.

First, I approached Franklin.
“What do you use on the grills?”

I must have caught him in a pre-verbal moment because he simply rubbed his hand in the air, kind of like the “wax-on, wax-off” routine from “The Karate Kid.” I was quite sure he had never touched one of them himself, so I figured that this was just an extension of the theoretical orientation session. I persisted.

“But do you have something that will clean them?”

Now I was pushing it. I was asking him for an intervention that required both thought and energy. If there was one thing that COs couldn’t stand, it was being asked to do something that required any combination of thought and energy.

He pointed vaguely in the direction of the spigots, the contents of which were still mysterious to me. I was fairly sure that they weren’t additives for the cappuccino maker, but it was unclear as of yet what they actually had in them. One disgorged a fluid that had a slightly bluish cast; another had a slight greenish cast; another something that was completely clear. All smelled vaguely like soap, but then so did most of the food that was being prepared so that wasn’t much of a guarantee of anything. Since I was getting nowhere with Franklin and the ovens and their racks were awaiting attention, I decided to try the empirical approach.
I took a red bucket and filled it with the slightly bluish stuff. I then took a cloth, saturated it and rubbed it on the inside of the warm-to-hot oven. Nothing blew up, so I figured it wasn’t anything with toluene in it. It did instantly turn into a thick, gummy substance that seemed to be adding to the problem rather than helping to solve it. More of it added more to the problem. I decided that working with the hot ovens was just going to have to wait. So I took a couple of the grills, found an empty sink, filled it with the blue stuff and the grills, then looked to see if I could get into some other trouble while I waited to see if anything occurred.

I decided it was time to clean the floor, so I carefully dumped several buckets of hot, presumable soapy water on the floor and began madly sweegeeing. Of course, this was occurring while about twelve guys were running around trying to prepare the meal for the line. To their credit, no one blamed me for turning their workplace into a potential multi-car crash site and simply turned their slips and mad pirouettes into their line of attack for their jobs. To me, it was amazing that no one went down. Despite the direct threat to their well-being that my actions represented, these guys understood that I was simply operating according to the insane dictates of the BOP and didn’t hold me responsible. In that respect, I found that inmates are much more mature than those who work for the DOJ or the BOP,
whose tendency to inappropriately ascribe blame was in evidence all around me.

“Line!”

This was bellowed by the rather formidable looking woman who was primarily in charge of meal preparation. I knew this lady from my extensive orientation session, the one where I had been strongly encouraged to commit a federal offense by falsely attesting to having undergone training in all sorts of kitchen-related activities. She was actually a nice and competent person, something that was rare enough among COs that it caused one to stand out. Of course, she was also one tough lady and an inmate who mis-stepped might find his testicles appearing as hors d’oeuvres for the next meal. While working in the dish room I had already become acquainted with this whole line thing, and knew that I was expected to find my place.

The ADX meal line is something that occurred three times on each of our shifts, and it consisted of filling some five hundred different colored trays for transportation to the various security wings of the facility. It took about eight guys to fully staff this line, not counting the two COs who stood there to make sure that the inmates were working.

Generally speaking, COs’ jobs seemed to largely consist of watching inmates work. What we have effectively done in America is create prison complexes where virtually all of the basic jobs
are being performed by the residents of the attached prison camps. This is important in a number of ways. First and foremost, it employs a whole lot of people—not inmates—COs. The inmates are essentially working for free. I suppose one could argue that they are receiving room and board but I think this same logic was outlawed with the death of slavery in America. Holding someone against his or her will and then telling that person that you are doing them a favor by housing them and feeding them seems a strange way to think about things. It seems even stranger when you see the statistics suggesting that a significant percentage of them very likely didn’t commit a crime. In reality, federal prison camps in America have evolved into gulags, i.e. quasi-political work camps. It’s just that we don’t like to think of ourselves as functioning that way. That’s for those pinko Russkies.

Anyway, the COs didn’t work—they supervised, that is when they weren’t watching TV, surfing the internet, or doing crossword puzzles or Sudoku. The inmates strongly suspected that the COs didn’t really know how to do the jobs, which is why they assigned certain of the inmates to certain tasks. But there were problems in that approach as well. An inmate may have been a plumber on the outside but gotten assigned to carpentry while incarcerated, while the carpenters ended up doing electrical. The physicians were likely to be found in
recycling. One has to remember that it was the COs doing the job assignment, which was one of those tasks that required thought and energy. Hence it was likely avoided most of the time.

So the situation that now exists in most American prisons is the work is performed by inmates who may or may not have any training or experience for the jobs to which they have been assigned, and who are supervised by COs who probably know little about it either, and who are highly motivated to avoid work. But it is certainly cost-effective. Rather than paying salaries, you have slave labor. But wait, the public paid hundreds or thousands (if not millions) of dollars to charge and convict each inmate, there is a burgeoning number of highly-paid and benefitted Department of Justice workers to handle that workload, and the slaves have not replaced the original workers, as the latter continue to supervise with full pay and benefits. Add to that the fact that it is the most rapidly growing arm of the federal government and that in order to support it we have had to quintuple the number of people incarcerated in America over the last sixty years, and it starts looking a little less cost-effective. Don’t try having this kind of conversation with a CO. They are likely to try to set you on fire.

“Line!”
I took my place in the line of about ten inmates, each with his discrete function. There was the guy who grabbed the tray and put one thing in it, then the guy who put the next thing in it, etc. A true assembly line. At each step the tray was slid to the left, often with some amount of sloshing of food. Each tray finally reached the “lidder” who slapped a plastic lid on it and set it in a pile for the “stackers” to put in the hot/cold trucks. Five hundred and fifty trays. A lot of scooping, sloshing, lidding, and stacking. Being males and young, this of course immediately turned into a competitive exercise. “Slide!, slide!, slide!,” was the refrain we heard, ad nauseum, telling us to keep those trays moving lest it take us thirty-four minutes instead of thirty-one to complete the line. The main variable was speed, with the typical and predictable result. Some trays didn’t make it to the end of the line. When this occurred there was a glare from the potentially testicle-removing CO, and you could see her mental abacus toting up the pushups she would collect from the offending inmate(s) later.

While this sounds like a relatively benign activity, it was actually fraught with peril for the inmates. In order to serve the various dishes, we were handed various inappropriate implements. None seemed to actually work effectively at serving the food, and poor performance was always underscored by the
threat of some kind of completely unanticipatable disciplinary action. My favorite personal experience involved an ice-cream scoop and gluey mashed potatoes.

Now it has probably never occurred to you that ice-cream scoops are either right-handed or left-handed. It’s all about where the thumb button is. Being left-handed, I’ve learned to notice these things over the course of my life.

“Here.”

I was handed a right-handed ice-cream scoop and place in front of the glutatoes. The trays began their trek and I had no time to address what I saw as an incipient problem. The first tray hit and (being somewhat cross-dominant) I decided to do this right-handed. For those of you right-handed people who are wondering what the big deal was, I suggest you take such an implement and go serve five hundred and fifty scoops of Elmer’s glue with your left hand. I bet you would find it to be more of a challenge than you suspect.

The first scoop plopped out rather easily, so I was encouraged and thought maybe I was just worrying unduly. Five hundred forty-nine to go. The second scoop plopped out, but even two scoops in I could see that there was trouble brewing. Not all the glutatoes were coming out of the scoop. The next five trays whizzed by and with each one the glutatoes adhered a little more to the scoop. It was kind of like the icy-snow
combination that builds up in your wheel wells during a really nasty snowstorm. I took to banging the scoop after each delivery, trying to knock off the increasing residue. After about one hundred trays I was surprised that I started to get a tired right arm. I told myself that this was because I was using my off hand, but I’m also aware of the research that shows that males lose about ten percent of their muscle mass each decade after forty. That means that I am probably about twenty percent weaker than I was twenty years ago. Somehow the relevance of this fact seemed to be increasing. So was the fact that my back was starting to ache. Clearly, I was something of a line wuss.

Another fifty trays. There was a new development. The scoop was evidencing a rattle, probably due to the continuous banging I was subjecting it to. I switched hands. That was interesting. In order to use the right-handed scoop with my left hand, I had to engage in a peculiar arm movement, probably something like trying to throw a forkball in baseball. I immediately understood why they don’t let kids throw curves. I suspect they would say the same thing to near-geriatrics.

Then a part fell off the scoop. Now this was serious. First, I had to fish it out of the glutatoes without contaminating them too much, at least that’s how my orientation session would have suggested to handle it, if the issue hadn’t
been avoided altogether. Then I had to ascertain if the scoop was still functioning, while never breaking ranks with the line. Somehow, the scoop was still operational, kind of like John Elway learning to throw a football after he’d lost his bicep tendon. But most importantly, I was responsible for that scoop. Whenever an inmate is given such implements in the BOP it always comes with the threat that if it isn’t turned in everyone on the shift will go to the hole until it is found. So, I carefully put the piece in my pocket and kept scooping.

Another piece fell off. This time it seemed like it made a bit more difference, as the machine now had a hitch in its get-along. The glutatoes were also proving a bit more resistant to disengaging. Perhaps the combination of the banging and the incipient free-fall were proving to be too intimidating. We were up to two hundred trays – only three hundred and fifty to go. I now had a partially malfunctioning implement, and my morning dose of Advil had long since worn off, but I was not going to the weak link in the chain. I scooped madly and shoved the trays down the line.

“Slide!, slide!, slide!”

“Oh, shut the fuck up.” (Thought, not said.)

We were finally in the home stretch. I now had four scoop pieces in my pocket and was about at the end of my scooping tether. The thumb button had long since become completely
useless. And each time I banged the scoop to knock off the glutatoes another piece threatened to submarine into the pile. It was going to be close.

But just like my prison sentence, the trays did end eventually. I carefully cleaned off all the pieces, as well as the survivor-scoop base, and handed them back to my supervisor. She looked at me like I had purposefully dismantled the thing before muttering, “I’m not putting any more left-handers on the line.” As I turned I heard her comment to no one in particular, “and they keep giving me these old guys.” I put my hand protectively over my privates and sidled away. It would not be line time again until the next day. I needed to rest up with some serious sanitizing.

It was time to check on the grills. I went to the sink where I had left them soaking in the blue stuff about two hours previously. In chemistry, water is sometimes referred to as the universal solvent, so my theory was that even water should have had some kind of impact during that time frame. I pulled out the first rack. Tentatively scraping at the char with my fingernail, then less tentatively with a chore boy, I was struck by how completely impervious it appeared to be. Here, it had been soaking in some type of soap (presumably the blue stuff was soap, since we were using it to clean all sorts of things), yet there had been no identifiable impact on the material welded to
the grill. And I was running out of time. So I carefully rinsed all the grills, which barely managed to turn the water an off-gray, and put them back in the ovens. This was clearly something that needed further study. Grills were back on the agenda in a week, and since I figured since they had already existed in a like condition for years, if not eons, they would wait.

Once again I turned my eye to the floor, which I had already figured out was always a way to be able to do something, whether it needed doing or not. Creating a soap ice rink for my compadres was considered good form at all times. Besides, it was almost the end of the shift when the floors got their last going over. I filled my buckets and dumped.

At that moment I saw something whistling by out of the corner of my eye. I stepped back rapidly, just in time as it turned out. An empty plastic milk crate whizzed by me, sliding along the floor toward the back door of the kitchen. It skidded to a stop about five feet short of the door, which elicited laughter off to my right. A few seconds later another milk crate followed the first, this one causing the inmate who was walking carefully over by one of the grills to skip sideways, almost taking a header as he kicked up a soapy puddle. I looked more carefully, expecting to see some inmate who had decided to overcome his boredom by risking killing the rest of us. But
instead of an inmate, I saw Franklin winding up to deliver the next crate. This had not been covered in my orientation; I would have remembered. He eyed the next delivery carefully, then did a softball windmill windup. Off went the crate, except this time it stuck to his fingers and arched toward the ceiling. It crashed into the florescent light cover, shattering it and sending sharp plastic shards in about a ten-foot radius, some of them coming perilously close to the next batch of glutatoes that were cooking in anticipation of the next shift’s line. I glanced back at Franklin, but couldn’t detect any change in his expression. Needless to say, the shot was quite short. Somehow I also knew as Head Sanitizer it was going to be my job to clean up the remnants of the light fixture. I didn’t anticipate being asked to strain the glutatoes.

I swept up the shrapnel, re-soaped the floor, so that future milk cartons would slide that much more freely, and was just about to call it a day when I heard.

“Trash Run!”

This was the signal that our shift was about to end. Immediately all the inmates dropped whatever they were doing and gathered up the fifteen or so large, rolling trash receptacles that needed to be emptied into the large bin outside. It was really a large trash compacter, one that supposedly ran by a key, but it was a key that no one ever seemed to have. That
wasn’t too much of a barrier. I’ve mentioned that inmates are a very resourceful lot. An inmate ID card could be used very successfully to turn the keyed lock on a large trash compactor, something I’ll try to remember, if I can every think of a possible generalizable use in the real world, our name for that large expanse of the country outside of Federal Toonville.

The only other memorable thing about trash runs was the fact that the cans weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds fully loaded, which meant that only the young with intact backs had any hope of actually being of much help in this task. The rest of us simply caught the empty cans and lined them up for the next shift. I would like to point out that we did this without taking out any light fixtures.

The days went on, and I found myself getting uneasy for an unidentifiable reason. Sure, the government had put me in prison for an alleged crime I certainly hadn’t intended to commit, I had bankrupted myself going to trial, and I was nearing retirement age with no clue how I was going to put things back into any semblance of order, but all that was the norm. I was used to those kinds of intrusive thoughts. This had a different quality. During my chronic insomniac episodes I mulled about this growing sense of unease. Then it came to me. I was fast approaching Death-Defying Tuesday, the day when I was expected to once again climb onto the greasy deep-fat
fryers and clean the hoods. I’d done that once and lived, but I knew that I would be seriously tempting fate if I tried it again.

As I often do when I am grappling with a difficult decision, I pushed it out of my mind to let my brain chew it over on its own. The next morning I woke in the throes of an epiphany. I could hardly wait to get to work. Well, that’s stretching it. I actually had absolutely zero interest in going to work on that Tuesday or any other day. Indentured servitude simply isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. But assuming I had to work, which certainly appeared to be the case, I wanted to try out my plan.

I went through the various admission procedures, proving to all the COs that I wasn’t keestering a VW bus into the kitchen, and went straight to the sanitation sundries area. As Head Sanitizer I was privy to some specialized and valuable information, such as where the rags were kept. I knew because I had created them by cutting up many, many towels with an unbelievable dull knife that was on a locked chain, and had stored them away. You see, rags were a prized commodity in the kitchen. Virtually everything you did ended up generating either dirt or water, which then needed to be cleaned up. So, everyone tried to keep rags on hand. And they were somewhat apportioned, since it appeared that the COs didn’t want anything
like a black market rag operation going on. Knowing where they were kept meant that I could get about as many as I wanted. It’s amazing the things that become important when your universe has been reduced to the size of a walnut.

Next to the rags was a line of cans, each of which was carefully labeled “bad can.” I figured this was some kind of strange disciplinary status for cans in the BOP and decided to ignore them. When things are misbehaving, it’s often best to ignore them, that is, if you wish to extinguish the offending behavior. It’s how I typically handled the COs.

I grabbed my rags and began to execute my plan. Taking two mops handles I figured out a way to wrap a rag around each end, so that the rags wouldn’t fall off. This effectively extended my reach by about five feet. This was more than enough to reach the hoods from the ground, turning my height from a disadvantage that had me crumpled into a pretzel inside a hood, to an advantage. I’m sure that this was not a patentable intervention strategy. In fact, I’m fairly certain that in any system other than the BOP it would have been the preferred intervention strategy, one well-covered in an orientation session. But here it was like I had invented fire. I could see the grudging admiration behind the eyes of the COs as they saw me approach the dreaded hoods armed with my new weapons.

“What are those?” Franklin asked, sidling up to me.
Since I was already using them, it seemed rather obvious in a literal sense, so I went for the process explanation.

“I was trying to think of a solution that met both our needs.”

I didn’t clarify that his need was probably to injure or kill me and mine was to thwart him. I have to confess that after our first conversation, I always checked surreptitiously to see if Franklin was carrying matches or potentially flammable liquids.

Franklin drifted away, probably looking for more government property to destroy.

My plan worked like a charm and Death-Defying Tuesday became my favorite day of the week. I still had to be careful not to drip all over the grills that were frequently being used while I was cleaning the hoods. It seemed likely that it could have added an unattractive underlay to the food.

There was an unintended benefit from the towel and mob handle project. Since I had to discover something that would cut about five years worth of grease, for some reason it made me think of the grills. The blue stuff hadn’t worked. But a super concentration of the green stuff seemed to be handling those hoods. So it was into a green stuff bath for the grills. Lo and behold, about four hours later it only took me about twelve chore boys to get all the char off. As a sanitizer I was
rapidly turning into a screaming success, as in someone who is having success while internally screaming.

I was to remain the Head Sanitizer on the AM shift throughout the rest of my stint at the ADX kitchen. For the most part I rotated through my weekly list of activities, gradually developing strategies that worked for each. But then one day I was informed that it was time to wash down the whole kitchen. I looked at the CO who was bringing me that news, thinking that perhaps he was kidding. But he took me outside to where someone had gathered up about 200 feet of hose and informed me that I needed to affix it to one of the spigots, then use the resulting spray to wash down and clean all the kitchen walls. This had to be done while the meals were being prepared, which meant that I would be shooting water all over an industrial kitchen while it was operating in full swing, with about fourteen inmates tending to two grills and numerous other tasks. There was another CO behind him and I thought I saw some ambivalence on his face. We exchanged looks but it was clear whose authority was going to prevail. The first CO then explained to me that they didn’t have a nozzle for the hose, and that I would have to pinch it off, while using my hand to create a spray. This was an industrial hose and didn’t lend itself to being bent, let alone closed off. I considered this project. I
approached the second CO, the one whose misgivings were written all over his face.

"Just for the record," I said, conversationally. "I’m about to make one hell of a mess in here."

He nodded, then said to me quietly, "You might want to wear gloves, and try not to touch anything with that hose. The last thing we used it for was to snake out the sewer."

I nodded back. Made perfect sense. I’m sure the Health Department would have agreed with the warning.

After a few months of this kind of thing, one day I reached the point where I could put in for a transfer. Given my background, the teacher in the education department had always been open to me jumping on board there, but first I had to get signed out of my current assignment, something that wasn’t always easy to get to happen. I approached Mr. Smith, the Real Head Guy in the kitchen.

This happened on the same day that my outside medical records finally caught up with the BOP, the ones that said I had an arthritic back and shouldn’t stand too long without moving or lift too many heavy things. Given my twenty-degree now permanent tilt, I had just spent three months validating the diagnostic acumen of my general practitioner, and given that he was also now functioning under a federal indictment for some
cockamamie thing, he probably would have appreciated the moral support.

I explained my situation to Mr. Smith.

“For what it’s worth, I’ve got a lot of education and would like to help guys get their GEDs.”

Mr. Smith looked me over carefully. “You’re the guy with those poles, aren’t you?”

My reputation for innovation had preceded me.

“The very same.”

DaVinci couldn’t have been prouder in front of the Medicis. “You’re always working when I look out there; I appreciate that.”

The beauty of random sampling.

“Sure, why not? Maybe you can help some of those guys.”

He signed me out. It wasn’t exactly Escape from Alcatraz, but as I cycled through the multiple checkpoints that day for what I presumed was the very last time I certainly felt like I was escaping. I had seen the edge of the vortex and it hadn’t sucked me in. It was back to the camp where, while not avoidable, at least the lunacy was definable.

It was all good. “... AUM ...”
How do I count thee
Let me count the ways

When I first got to the camp I rather timidly asked one of the guys who looked kind of like me, “So, what’s it like here?” He seemed to think about it, then replied rather laconically, “Well, you get counted a lot.” That was quite the understatement. After a couple of years I decided that the BOP is being staffed by refugees from the Sesame Street generation; and that The Count must have been their favorite character. Their obsession with counting us was played out to absolutely bizarre levels.

Granted, the public probably wants to know when one of the 220,000 American citizens currently federally incarcerated is
missing. One might think of that as a safety issue, until you realize that many of us at the camp had existed out in society throughout multi-year investigations, entire trials and pre-sentencing periods, and often after sentencing as well, all the way up until we had self-reported to be incarcerated. Most of the rest had worked their way to the camp level by demonstrating consistently nonviolent behavior and general self-discipline. Couple all that with the absence of a fence and it was a truism that most of us were there because we agreed to be there.

But count us they did, and with a level of obsessivity that cried out for a heavy dose of Anafranil. On normal days we were counted at 4pm, 10pm, 12am, 3am, and 5am, with 10am thrown in on holidays and weekends. Some of those were routine counts; some were “stand-up” counts, “bed-book” counts, “census counts,” “emergency counts,” or “just-for-the-hell-of-it” counts. The first time they yelled “Bed-book count!” I thought they said “bed-bug count” and yelled back “Three!” before I caught myself. The middle of the night counts played hell with my insomnia, and it was a rare night that I missed any of them. It got so that I would wake up just before 3, then just before 5, except for those nights where I never managed to go back to sleep, which was more often than not. Then, just before I left they changed the 10pm count to a “stand-up” count, which meant that the guys who were scheduled to get up to go to work in the middle of the
night had to make sure they were awake and standing at 10pm, with all the lights in the range turned on. That was to ensure that they had ample sleep and could perform their work tasks in complete safety. It is a fortunate thing for the BOP that agencies like OSHA don’t seem to know that they exist.

In short, in the minds of most of the COs, counting was simply the most important single function they performed in the course of their days, barely eclipsing trying to catch people smoking. So it struck me as very odd that they seemed to hire only the math-challenged.

There were 550 inmates in the camp for most of the time that I was there. These people were split into two residence buildings, about 300 in one and 250 in the other. It was truly amazing how many times they were unable to reconcile those counts. And the reasons for these failures were quite requisite in their variety.

On one occasion they came through about five times in the middle of the night, each time muttering a bit more loudly as they reached our cube at the end of the wing. They were one off and it was clearly proving to be an issue that was taxing their resources. That time it only took about forty-five minutes to straighten it out. At least they didn’t end up resorting to the dreaded in-the-middle-of-the-night bed-book count that required everyone to rise and remain standing while they had us provide
our names and numbers, and they matched us with pictorial entries in their census books. Possibly this was to make sure that no one had hired a local to fill in for him while he sipped margaritas at a nearby restaurant. It was during one of those that I overheard the following exchange.

“This is a stand-up count!”
“I am standing.”
“No, your leg is leaning against your bed.”
“I was asleep; I’m trying to keep from falling over.”
“This is a stand-up count!”
“I am standing.”
“This is a stand-up count! Stand up.”
“Haven’t we been here before?”

Usually their problem was that someone was at work and not being counted correctly there, or someone had been moved and the appropriate records hadn’t been updated. Once they had moved a guy from our residential unit to the other unit and they kept coming up one long in the other unit and one short in ours. That baffled them for quite a while. Because every event ended up running through a paranoid thought sieve for the COs, we were told that they found someone hiding under a bed in the other unit. We knew that wasn’t true, unless he had somehow tunneled there from our unit where they kept coming up one short. On one of their midnight counting pass-throughs I heard a neighbor
mutter, “These yahoos couldn’t count to 21 unless they were naked.” I understood the sentiment, but didn’t appreciate the image.

Perhaps my favorite episode occurred before my time and was part of inmate lore. This involved a guy who had a pretty quick wit, and a tongue to match. He was in the bathroom and cut it a little too fine when count time occurred. As he was leaving the bathroom heading back to his cube, the hung over and chronically dyspeptic CO who was conducting the count that evening bumped into him. There was the following exchange:

“You fucked up my count!”

To which the inmate responded, raising a finger, “Plus one?”

This particular inmate had “borrowed” some moon rocks from NASA for sale over the internet. It was probably better than selling false deeds to the moon properties, but was frowned upon by the feds nonetheless.

My second favorite episode involved two COs who were having trouble reconciling their individual counts and were quite puzzled. As they walked by one of the cubes they discussed the problem.

“I got 31. What did you get?”

“32”

“OK, we’ll go with yours.”
Clearly, it was a precise process.

It was after witnessing multiple exchanges like these that I began to wonder whether our prison system might have an ulterior reason for its existence. Mulling this, I remembered that just inside the ADX door is a sign making it very clear why the ADX is there. Oddly, it doesn’t mention things like bloated federal budgets or the need to demonize an increasing segment of the American citizenry to support the incarceration industry. It is much more concise. It says – “We protect You From What You Fear The Most.”

Now, granted, there is a literal interpretation of this that may have been the intention, and also granted, there are a number of people incarcerated at the ADX in particular about whom the description “not very nice” would be an understatement. But this motto has come to be adopted much more unilaterally throughout the BOP, and in doing so, has become subject to some ambiguity of interpretation.

This caused me to give the matter considerable thought, which in turn led me to consider a variety of different possible meanings. In fact, the more I thought about it I wasn’t even sure who was supposed to be reading that sign. It was located in a place where only staff of the BOP were going to see it, although, I guess the occasional visitors and the inmates performing several of the functions to keep the ADX running
might see it from time to time. But it was clearly not intended for public distribution, or it would have appeared on the T-shirts that COs might wear to the bar at night in an effort to impress the locals.

So if the staff were meant to be the primary target, it seemed to me that one should be able to finish it in several more obviously appropriate ways. For example – “We Protect You from What You Fear The Most – Failure.” Or “We Protect You From What You Fear the Most – Unemployment.” Actually, the more I thought about it, based on my general experience with the COs at the camp, it should probably have been completely rewritten to something more like “We Employ the Otherwise Unemployable,” with “Your Tax Dollars at Work” as the possible small print second line.

Math-challenged or not, count us they did. And did. And did. On one of her first visits in the Visiting Room my wife got to experience the level of threat that this represented for some of the staff. At 10am we all were told to line up in two lines so that we could be counted. One of the more marginal COs then proceeded to waddle down the line marking us off two-by-two as he went. But then he got to the end and it was an odd number. He was so thrown off that he had to start over. I glanced over at my wife and could see that she had her hand over her face, trying to hide the look of stunned horror that had
overcome her features. She was probably also trying to keep from dissolving into laughter that, at that early point in our experience, could easily have progressed rapidly to hysteria.

On another occasion in the VR, there were only four of us to count. The mean age was about 65, and one was dependent on a walker for locomotion. Perhaps this would be a good time to reiterate that the public’s perception that federal prison camps are filled with robust, young antisocial types is a bit erroneous. We had a guy with advanced Parkinsonism who couldn’t have run away if being chased by the 85-year-old guy with dementia, although he might have been able to elude the blind guy. The two guys without legs would have given him a run for his money, and the guys in wheelchairs would have flat out smoked him. The rest of the 55-plus crowd just tried to stay alive to the end of their sentences without having to go to medical, something that would have significantly decreased their chances. But it was all good. We had been assured by the Camp Administrator that there “were no disabled people in this camp.” I bet that came as both a surprise and a relief to the disabled inmates.

Anyway, there we were, all four of us old guys, visiting our similarly vintaged accomplice wives, the sole occupants of the VR. Rather than simply looking up from their internet surfing, these two young guys lined us up and diligently counted
us, both of them. Actually, they had to wait until a third CO showed up to man the desk while they did so – division of labor and all that.

I commented, “It’s going to be a very slow jail break – Joe, just don’t hit me with your walker.”

The COs were only marginally amused. But that was OK, because they were marginal in every other aspect as well. At least they both came up with four and we didn’t have to do a recount. That could have taken hours.

And it was good to remember that counting wasn’t always just about the numbers. Most of the time it was also about the power, which caused the COs to use counts as a pretext for the searches that occurred constantly. The rationale was that it was very important to confiscate contraband items like tobacco, but this was only part of it. It was obviously also very important to confiscate things like the yellow markers we used to make sure our commissary items got seen on the sheets we turned in so that half our orders didn’t end up getting missed, or the beads that someone who made jewelry kept neatly organized in his cube, or for that matter, any of the clothing or other stuff that the inmates got through the commissary gauntlet. And sometimes it was about counting the number of books that an inmate had in his locker and making threats if the number seemed excessive.
“You keep all these books lying around and you’re going to the hole!” was a threat delivered to one bemused inmate.

The targeted property changed, but the power games attendant to the process remained a constant. And for some reason certain COs found it very important to completely trash someone’s cube while doing their searches. You might go up to the VR, only to return and find everything in your cube thrown everywhere, and your mattress cut open, just to make sure you hadn’t hidden a cigarette inside. Such searches were routine, and we got used to them. At various times we would see them kick everyone out of the residences and descend en masse. After an hour or so we would all go back to see what chaos had been created and put our remaining things back together.

One memorable such episode was something that had clearly been planned as a training exercise. We watched as a bus pulled onto the compound and disgorged about thirty fledgling COs in full camouflage gear and flak jackets. They swarmed over the residences for several hours, carting enormous quantities of stuff out to the dumpsters. Whether they actually found anything that constituted serious contraband was never known. But they certainly helped punch up the commissary sales for the next couple of weeks. I found the marketing strategy to be really effective and started thinking about how great it would be for the American economy if it could be adopted by Wal-Mart.
Just think if they could send a bunch of anonymous goons into your house to trash and steal all your appliances and clothes. Think how it could boost their resales.

The best moment of this event came when an incarcerated banker who happened to be the most openly gay inmate in the compound started batting his eyes at the commandos.

“Oh,” he cooed, “you guys look so HOT in your tight vests and those cammies.” Then, with only a slightly malicious smile, he blew them an air kiss.

The legions of testosterone-soaked minions had no idea how to respond. Most simply made guttural noises and marched off.

After being constantly amazed at the wide variety of ways in which these guys could screw up the task of simply counting inmates, I was given a piece of insight into the depth of the problem. My new job was to tutor in the Education Department, meaning that I was one of the teachers trying to help inmates pass their GEDs. Even though we weren’t called teachers, we were the ones who did the teaching, while the teacher mainly processed paper and data on Amazon.com. She was a young, reasonably attractive lady, which meant that some of the other young, male COs liked to come in and flirt with her, that is, until they realized that her husband also worked for the BOP in the ADX and was about 6’7”. On this day a CO came to visit who obviously hadn’t yet met her husband. He decided to sit out in
the classroom while one of the other tutors was going through some math. That day it was basic algebra. The particular problem on the board was “2x + 3 = 7,” with students being asked to solve for x. He looked at this problem and his eyes got wide.

“Wow!” he said, obviously impressed with the advanced level of the math that we were teaching. As I looked at him I remembered my neighbor’s comment, and the thought jumped into my mind – “I hope he never has to get to 22.”

Counting inmates wasn’t the only way in which BOP employees demonstrated the degree to which math was their bane. The magnitude of the problem became evident over the course of my stay, particularly after the inmate population doubled.

The camp was designed to hold about 250 people and when I was first incarcerated we had about 350 residents. The meant that we had about 350 guys vying for chairs in the rec room, the TV rooms, standing in chow line – in short, utilizing the resources that were common in the camp. Then the census dropped to about 280 for some unknown reason, only to almost immediately balloon to about 550, where it remained throughout the rest of my time. But the administrators never saw fit to increase the number of anything that constituted common resources. In fact, whenever an opportunity arose, they went the other direction. Of course, the result was a politics of scarcity that developed
throughout the camp, which the COs then attempted to counteract through an increasingly bizarre set of largely punitive interventions.

I went to chow one day and there was a sign.

“We are short glasses in the kitchen. You will bring glasses back from the units or we will do a full camp shakedown.”

As with all things that emanated from the administration, there was an assumption that there was some kind of nefarious inmate activity driving any given problem. Obviously, the inmates were stealing the glasses from the kitchen to use in their cubes, rather than using the thermal mugs that every inmate in the camp had in his possession, having purchased one at commissary. Admittedly, very occasionally one would see a kitchen glass in units, but it was rare. Since the inmates were capable of rational thought, we had an alternate explanation. The kitchen was short about 150 glasses, by their own report, a number that they had derived from how they were running short before the conclusion of meals. However, they had added about 150 inmates to the population in the months prior to making this observation, without adding any more glasses from the warehouse to the pool.

150

150
We scratched out heads. There seemed to be something about those two numbers.

Then there was the Great Bowl Shortage.

“The kitchen is short of bowls,” we were told. Now, this had a little more potential validity, as inmates were inclined to transplant the occasional bowl from the kitchen to their units. However, this couldn’t be too big an issue, since we were never served anything in bowls.

But it was the intervention the really struck me. I was sitting in my cube when a couple of COs came in and bellowed.

“Everyone out!”

We left. As we exited the unit, we were carefully patted down.

I asked another inmate, “What are they looking for?”

“Bowls,” was the reply.

Unless I looked like I was wearing a large athletic cup, I’m not sure where I was supposed to be hiding a bowl. Keestering one was simply out of the question.

It just seemed like they were always counting something, whether or not we could make any sense of the process.

TP was an item that garnered occasional attention. It was handed out usually once or twice a week and some inmates like to keep a rather large supply on hand, having had the experience of going without and not having enjoyed it. Most of the time this was not an issue, but every now and then there would be an anti-
hoarding attack that would hit a particular case manager or CO. One guy got so exercised that he went through the units and confiscated virtually every loose roll of TP he saw. He ended up with huge bags of the stuff. Then he called everyone down and gave each person one roll. It was a kind of redistribution of wealth program – socialism at work in the BOP.

But it was with chairs where the COs really turned themselves inside out. When they increased the census from 350 to 550 it somehow never occurred to anyone that perhaps they needed to add a few chairs. In fact, they would replace some of them from time-to-time, and then throw out the old ones. This one issue created more tension in the environment than any other, and one was inclined to conclude that this was by design. Surely no administrator would have been so brain dead as to think they had a workable system in place. Whenever there was a big football game on the rec room TV, or a movie in the gym, or any other highly popular event, every loose chair in the compound was relocated and carefully claimed. This left the library and classrooms void of chairs, and threatened to gut the chapel on a regular basis. Of course, to combat this the administration tried to implement an increasingly draconian set of measures. It was like everything else in the BOP. Rather than anticipate and avoid the problem, you allow the problem to develop and then try to punish your way out of it. I found
myself wondering if they had any behavioral consultants, and, if so, whether they were ever conscious during working hours.

The various religious groups resorted to posting sentinels over their chair supply in the chapel. The education lady ended up posting threatening signs – everyone tried to come up with his or her own way to control the uncontrollable. And all this to avoid buying some chairs. It was BOP lunacy at its finest.

While I was inclined to think that this counting problem was local to the setting, during my stay a Supreme Court decision came up that made me think perhaps there was a similar issue at work at all levels of government. It was called the Barber decision, and involved the way in which the BOP counted an inmate’s “good time” days. These are days that are automatically subtracted from the end of an inmate’s sentence, presuming that inmate had not done something intolerably antisocial while incarcerated, like carrying fruit too often out of the dining hall, or joining several of the COs in smoking on the compound. It was how these days were computed that was the issue.

I should point out that there is a great disparity between how much federal inmates serve of their sentences, when compared to state inmates. It’s about 65% for the state and 87% for the federal. Then there is the issue that states still grant parole, while the feds don’t. The bottom line is that, if
incarcerated, the federal facilities are physically nicer, but you end up serving a much greater percentage of your sentence. But the particular counting issue involved in the Barber decision was all internal to the federal system and arose from a certain ambiguity in the relevant statute.

Federal law and BOP policy both state that each inmate who demonstrates acceptable behavior is eligible for 54 days of "good time" a year. Now, I was teaching math in GED classes and it seemed pretty easy to compute that 54 rounds to 15% of 365. But somehow when it came to implementation the BOP turned that into 47 days. Applying the same higher math told me that 47 was 13% of 365. Somehow we had all lost 2% of our good time somewhere between the law, the policy, and the action. To do so, the BOP employed a convoluted method of computation based on accrual rates, producing the very screwy situation where only people with a sentence of 1 year had a chance of actually getting 54 days of good time a year. At first I thought maybe it was like leap years and after 4 years it would correct, but that still left a bunch of missing days.

When this went to the Supreme Court it seemed like a pretty obvious slam dunk for the plaintiffs, especially since with the massive levels of incarceration currently occurring in America, those extra 7 days per inmate were costing the public in excess of 100 million dollars a year. This was at a time when everyone
was giving lip service to the need to cut governmental costs. But the Supreme Court must have had some ex-BOP-CO advisors because they ended up endorsing the BOP’s math. Actually, what they said we that the BOP had full discretion in this matter, so that having a law and a policy that stated 54 days per year didn’t matter if their practice was to grant only 47 days. It was a 6-3 decision, suggesting that some of the justices were less math-challenged than others, but that didn’t help us. When the decision came down, we inmates understood that the bar for math had been set pretty low, which explained a lot of what we were experiencing. We immediately started hoarding chairs.

At one point I thought perhaps they had decided to take a technological approach to the problem. One day we got up and were greeted by the appearance of a machine that looked like it had been designed by either Rube Goldberg or Dr. Seuss. Apparently it had been rolled in overnight and stuck in a prominent place where it dominated the desolate landscape of the compound. It was basically a twenty-foot tower, but one with all sorts of electronic gear hanging off of it, and with what looked like cameras at the top. We weren’t sure. Nor did we have any idea what it was supposed to be doing. Speculation began immediately and ranged from the obvious – a camera tower to back up the existing security system that was broken in spots, to the potentially more threatening – a cell phone
detector. Perhaps it was a high-power scanner that could locate missing bowls and glasses. I had the fleeting thought that maybe it was an electronic inmate counter that was going to work off thermal images. Maybe then we could start sleeping at night more than three hours at a time. Whatever it was, we knew that technology wasn’t exactly a strong suit of the BOP and that there was a relatively low chance of it actually working. One guy’s idea made the most sense to me, given the political climate at the time. He declared it a “Taliban Detector,” pointing out the need to expend those federal Homeland Security dollars. It must have worked, because the Taliban were clearly driven underground and during my time I never saw one.

The counting and resulting resource problems continued throughout my time. The population stayed high; they never increased the resources, and everyone simply got weirder and weirder in their efforts at accommodation or punishment, depending upon where their affiliations lay.

So the next time you see a BOP employee trying to do something in public that requires math, be kind. Remember that you are likely dealing with someone for whom math is a foreign language. If it is in your power to do so, help them. It’s only fair – after all, as their motto says, they are “Protecting You From What You Fear the Most” – having them work for you.
According to Greek mythology, Hercules was driven nuts by Hera after he had royally ticked her off about something or other, and in his Hera-induced psychotic rage ended up taking out his sons. After he scraped all his marbles back in a pile, he felt badly about committing general mayhem on his family and realized that this act had set him somewhat adrift in life. A quick trip to the Oracle of Delphi was intended to help him rediscover his focus, a precursor for anger management training. Now, modern historians think that the Oracle of Delphi was probably squatting over a volcanic vent that generated hallucinogenic gas, hence the cryptic nature of her advice:
“Like, really, quasi-hero dude, maybe thou shouldest work for this Eurystheus guy, he’s got some really cool stuff for you to do . . . either that or you could lick this toad here . . . I mean, it’s really good toad . . . Just leaveth the strangled chicken over there.”

So Hercules went to discharge his guilt by performing ten labors that Eurystheus put in front of him, sort of like an early form of federal restitution. Hercules was also going to get immortality out of it, which is a hell of a lot more than the feds ever offered me. Of course, also like the feds, the presumed penance is never really over and goals or rewards are always a moving target, so Eurystheus ended up adding a couple of labors on the back end. It was a clear breach of contract, but things were looser in those days. They hadn’t invented the concept of attorneys yet, which meant that everyone was much happier in general.

Now you may be wondering exactly what this has to do with my friend Fred. You see, Fred had many strong convictions. Among them was the belief that anything worth doing was worth doing with an eye to perfection. This partly emanated from his strongly entrenched Buddhist philosophy, but was also just a powerful aspect of his personality. He was also one of those people who liked staying busy, both physically and mentally. And he was a serious weightlifter, so found the physical
challenges related to his prison jobs a good complement to his complicated work-out regimen. Sadly for Fred, putting this kind of relentless pursuit of perfection together with anything related to the BOP, either its own internal management or your own employment as quasi-slave labor, means there is a train wreck in the offing. That was the situation in which Fred found himself, almost from the moment that he walked in the door of the camp. As I watched Fred toil his way through his time, I was often reminded of the Herculean nature of his somewhat self-imposed set of labors. Add there were odd parallels at work that seemed worth exploring.

The Nemean Lion

Hercules’ first labor was to slay the Nemean Lion, a creature that some misogynists claimed lured men in the form of a woman before becoming a lion and consuming them. This labor proved to be quite a challenge, Hercules’ part that is. Attractive women making fools of men is something that has been part of the gene pool since Adam first sacrificed a rib. Along the way Hercules bumped into this kid who stuck a deadline on the task, stating that he would sacrifice himself to Zeus if Hercules had not succeeded within the first 30 days. Why this mattered to Hercules, or the kid himself for that matter, is unclear, but it does smack of a strangely intense form of hero worship. It’s not just modern fans who are hard to figure out.
In any case, Hercules was big on arrows and, once he had located the lion, kept trying to shoot it. No one had told him that the lion’s hide was impenetrable. But apparently that didn’t extend to the lion’s brain because Hercules was eventually able to lure it into a cave and knock it silly with a club. He then strangled it. Shot, clubbed, strangled – it was very similar to Rasputin’s final hours. Hercules then used one of the lion’s own claws to skin it and turned the pelt into a coat, thus starting the early PETA movement in ancient Greece. It is said that the coat made Eurystheus look very dashing, indeed.

The Florencean Lion

Well, Fred had his own Nemean Lion with which he had to contend. Fred started out as the guy who cleaned the offices in the administrative wing of one of the higher security prisons in the complex. This included the Warden’s office, which made Fred something akin to being the Warden’s orderly, not to be confused with a general’s aide-de-camp. The latter usually has rank, the significance of which is intensified by the proximity to power. In Fred’s case, all that was intensified through his close relationship to the Warden was his suffering.

Now, the Warden was one of those guys who had worked his way up through the federal prison bureaucracy, which meant that his primary job was to escape negative attention. In turn, this meant that at some point he had abandoned all sense or reason in
order to be able to avoid implementing anything that was innovative and, therefore, a potential threat to his career. And we all know that in bureaucracies form exists in an almost direct inverse relationship to substance. Ergo, the Warden projected a regal, leonine presence in order to counteract his essential vacuity; i.e., he was a veritable lion of a figure.

Technically, it would have been bad form for Fred to actually slay the Warden, which made his task slightly less challenging than that of Hercules. Nor was he being lured by a woman, something that might have actually been an enjoyable diversion, given camp life in general. But his proximity to the Warden provided Fred with one very daunting task. It was Fred’s job to remove any fingerprints marring the shine of the Warden’s desk. These simply could not exist, lest the lion’s roar spread chill into Fred’s heart, and reverberate through the complex. Given the seemingly disproportionate response, and given the setting, one had to wonder if there wasn’t something somewhere in a fingerprint database that was causing this concern. Regardless, Fred became Fingerprint Remover to the Florean Lion and threw himself at the task with his typical fervor. He drew on his engineering background and developed a skill level in this area that, while not enviable to those of us who remembered what it was like to have a life, was at least recognized. And many was the time that he removed an offending
fingerprint, had his attention diverted briefly into something like wastebasket monitoring, only to turn back and see that new fingerprints had arisen, each of which had to be excised as rapidly as possible. It was his first labor, undeniably an inane experience, and a clear harbinger of things to come.

The Lernaean Hydra

Hercules’ second task was to rid the ancient world of the Lernaean Hydra, a nine-headed monster that had proved to be something of a pain to the locals, as its heads took turns playing fetch for each other as it chowed its way through the population. This task was made a bit more difficult because if you chopped off one head, two others replaced it, and one of the heads was immortal. It was kind of like being charged with removing the tails of certain salamanders living in today’s toxically infused waterways, either that or removing pork-barrel projects from the federal budget. Being something of a pragmatic soul, Hercules decided to enlist the help of another friend, whose job it was to cauterize the stumps after Hercules had removed a head so they wouldn’t just keep growing back. In that way Hercules was able to work his way through the heads until he could finally remove the immortal one and bury it. Presumably he buried this head far enough away from the body that it wouldn’t matter if someone later unearthed it on an archeological expedition.
It occurred to me in thinking about this that something similar happened to Joseph Haydn, the famous composer who became affectionately known as Papa Haydn, but in his case it was in reverse. When he died he was far from home on vacation and was temporarily buried until they could get around to transporting him through Europe to the family plot. But as luck would have it the local phrenological society was having a big meeting in the area. These were folks who were seriously into reading aspects of personality and ability through the location and size of head bumps. Given Haydn’s notoriety, his cabeza was simply too tempting to ignore. So they dug up his head. While the story suggests it was done in the name of scholarship, as anyone who has ever been to a convention knows, it could have simply been way too much vino combined with the age-regression effect that happens when men leave home for a few days. As luck would have it they were still taking turns fondling Haydn’s cranial bumps when his body got transferred to his home for reinterment. There ensued about 150 years where Haydn’s head rattled around Europe, at one point ended up a paperweight on someone’s piano, a macabre but somewhat appropriate fate. It was only a few years ago that Haydn’s head and body were rejoined in Eisenstadt, Austria, amidst much ceremony.

So, not being a phrenologist, Hercules conquered the Hydra and saw no need to either glorify or preserve the final head.
But Eurystheus decided to welch on the bet. He was upset because Hercules had gotten help and decided not to count this labor, reserving the right to tack another on the end. Most would consider this cheating on Eurystheus’ part, but at this point he was feeling kind of in control of things and was enjoying having Hercules clean up some of his domestic issues, so he didn’t really care. Off he went to mull about Hercules’ next labor.

**The Many-Headed Bureaucrat**

Fred didn’t actually have a nine-headed hydra to contend with, although some of the COs might have been delighted to have the technical and moral support for their problem-solving. Such things were beyond even the BOP budget. But after he left his job removing the warden’s fingerprints from his desk, he ended up the Head Orderly of one of the living units. It is a basic prison camp truism that any job title with the word “Head” in it is the wrong job. It threatens to put one in a position of having responsibility with no power, which is particularly dangerous when the actual employees, who are both powerless and angry, are looking for someone to take it out on. As Head Orderly, Fred had many masters – at least nine of them, and they all gave the appearance of immortality, with or without the “t.” Fred rarely got through a meal without having his name booming over the PA system, as he was being ordered to report to one or
another’s office to demonstrate his vast repertoire of cleaning skills. Such was Fred’s existence, almost 24/7. Nor was he allowed to remove any of these heads, although if he had it is undoubtedly that another two would have spring up to fill the void. Bureaucrats are like that. They abhor vacuums, especially the ones between their ears. So it was Fred’s lot to be endlessly responsive to an often conflicting set of rules and duties that were being ordered by the many heads of Florence, each representing an opportunity for failure, and reprimand. It was simply a tough place to be a hero.

At this point, you may begin to notice that there is one major difference between Fred and Hercules. Where Hercules dispatched the various tasks and monsters with which he was confronted, Fred’s tasks were endless, and the monsters unreachable. So I always thought of Fred’s labors being even more laborious than Hercules’, and certainly considerably less satisfying.

The Ceryneian Hind

Did you ever notice how so many of Hercules’s labors involved slaying this or that particularly noxious creature? Well, this was one of those where Eurystheus decided to get tricky. So far it was two zip against the nasty creatures, so this time he decided to see just how fast Hercules was and sent him to capture the very fleet and impossibly elusive Ceryneian
Hind. The assumption was that an offensive lineman-type might be able to best a beast through the application of sheer brawn, but capturing one of those super-fast fleet wide-outs would be a whole different ballgame. And for about a year it seemed to work. Hercules chased this hind to hell and gone, never getting close enough to have any shot at containment. Eurystheus actually had something of a covert agenda. Like hedge fund bankers, he was betting against himself, using someone else’s money. You see, the hind belonged to Artemis, aka Diana, the Goddess of the Hunt; and a very fine hind it was indeed. Eurystheus figured that if Hercules was going to keep actually accomplishing these tasks, he would give him one that in its completing would tick off a goddess. Maybe then she would get rid of Hercules for him, or better still, combine forces with Hera who was already the leader of the anti-Hercules contingent. Eurystheus was clearly one of those guys who liked to get women to do his dirty work. Alas, after a year or so Hercules did, in fact, catch his hind (although accounts vary as to how he actually pulled it off), but when he returned it to Artemis, (Diana) explaining that that he was only paying off a debt to Eurystheus, she forgave him. Presumably she simply ended up seriously annoyed with Eurystheus, and chewed his hind a good one.

The Notsofleet Goose
While Fred didn’t have Artemis to worry about; he was saddled with a strangely obsessive CO that had been elevated to the status of Unit Manager, and she was both less lucid and less forgiving. Nor was her hind particularly worth pursuing. But Fred was fast. In fact, he was really, really fast, having been a track star in his younger days. And the Florence compound was much smaller. Finally, the hind in this case more closely resembled a goose and was responsible for some of the droppings that marred the sidewalks and so disturbed this CO’s sleep. So when Fred received the mandate to pursue and contain the offending goose, the contest lasted only hours, not a year. The goose was simply no match for Fred’s open-field moves. And in the end, the CO in question was not remotely disturbed that the goose was corralled, although she did seem a bit put out when Fred returned it to her without first wringing its neck.

The Erymanthian Boar

Fourth for Hercules was the Erymanthian Boar, which was presented as a simple search-and-retrieval exercise, kind of like the WMDs of Iraq. But in Hercules’ case it appeared that the Boar actually existed. He did, however, get seriously sidetracked on his way to discharging this task. For some reason he decided to take a detour to the cave of a centaur friend of his known as Pholus. They proceeded to tie one on,
with the predictable consequence that things rapidly got out of control. The result was the crashing of the party by a bunch of other centaurs who had less heads for wine, and who ended up launching an attack, with unclear goals. More Middle Eastern parallels spring to mind. Things got a little grey in the telling after that, but poisoned arrows got involved, which resulted in an accidental flesh wound for Pholus, as so often happens when alcohol and weapons get mixed up. There was a bizarre segue that maybe involved the centaur Chiron, who ended up in so much pain from a poisoned arrow that he decided to switch up with Prometheus (who was being endlessly punished for giving humans fire) so that he could have his liver ripped out daily by an eagle just to take his mind off things. While at first blush it seems a little histrionic on Chiron’s part, I feel the same way when subjected to some country music artists, so have empathy for the extreme response. And supposedly Hercules ended up with a marker for Chiron’s immortality somehow as a result of that process. In any case, none of this seems to have had anything to do with the Boar, which, after the party, Hercules dutifully captured and dropped off with Eurystheus. This sent Eurystheus into a panic, causing him to start a game of hide-and-seek in his palace where he got the perpetual role of “hider.” For an ancient monarch, Eurystheus appears to have been something of a timid soul, perhaps explaining why he kept
sending Hercules to get rid of all these monsters and otherwise
do his scut work.

The Interminable Bore

Now there is absolutely zero chance that a boar would have
survived on the Florence compound. There were microwaves,
packets of sauces and plastic dishes to be bought at the
commissary, and a large number of Hispanic cooks who were quite
familiar with puerco al carbon de microwave. But if not boars,
there were bores aplenty, and one reached the level of legend.
As luck would have it, this Interminable Bore was the CO who was
most directly responsible for Fred’s duty assignments from one
day to the next. And he loved to hear his voice on the camp
intercom, usually calling back an inmate who had just left his
office, presumably so he could boom his own name one more time
around the compound. It got to the point that inmates leaving
his office would step outside and sit down for a while because
they knew they would be called back momentarily. In his role of
Head Orderly, Fred became the Interminable Bore’s favorite
target. It was simply Fred’s lot to be the subject of endless
irrational requests, all delivered with a combination of
concreteness and uninspiring pedantry that was truly an exercise
in punishment. Not only that, but Fred couldn’t really capture
and deliver this Bore to the Warden, without being sent to the
hole as a reward. I understood completely when Fred staked
himself out in the middle of the compound one day, having spread goose pate’ on his torso, looking longingly skyward in quest of an eagle.

The Augean Stables

Hercules was clearly on a roll, so Eurystheus decided he needed to bring him down a peg or two. No better way to do that than have him muck out some stalls owned by this guy named Augeas. Take it from someone who lives on property with horses, it’s hard to look even demi-godlike when one is up to one’s ankles in dung.

Now this particular labor had a few more wrinkles. The livestock involved were immortal, which meant (among other things) that they could shit their brains out with impunity. Kind of like a biological form of a senatorial filibuster. And the stables hadn’t been cleaned out in thirty years, by which time it is presumed that the livestock were only visible from the eyes up. Augeas thought he was clever and offered to pay Hercules one-tenth of the livestock if he managed the clean the thing out in a day. Personally, this wouldn’t have been nearly enough of a carrot for me, but apparently it turned Hercules’ crank because he set to it. But even he wasn’t about to take this on with a shovel. In what was fairly atypical for him, he decided to think outside the box. He rerouted a couple of rivers and had their mighty torrents flush the stables clean.
It was kind of like what Mulholland and the LA Water District did with the Owens River back in the early 1900s when they were looking to flush both water and corruption into SoCal politics. Reportedly it worked like a charm.

But it turned out that Augeas had never intended Hercules to actually accomplish this task so he refused to pay him. Not a problem. This time thinking well inside the box, Hercules simply killed him. Then, feeling fairly full of himself, he decided to use this event to establish the Olympic Games, although how he got from cow dung to garlands remains a bit obscure. In any case, the Greek version of the NCAA popped up about that point and declared the labor ineligible because he was considered as having been paid. Like the NCAA, they clearly had their priorities in place and expressed no concern about the homicide. So this fifth labor ended up being no labor at all.

The Summitian Stalls

As to Fred? Well the Head Orderly had among his responsibilities seeing that the various restrooms in the Summit living quarters were kept spic and span. There were about three hundred guys in each residence hall, representing at least eight countries and an untold number of cultural backgrounds. Some were raised in areas where septic systems abounded and toilet paper could not be flushed. Some probably found the term ‘toilet’ a bit quizzical. Had there been bidets, it is likely
that some of the North Americans would have mistaken them for low water fountains. In short, it was safe to say that there were a wide variety of standards in play within the overall population.

Fred gave it his all. He was both meticulous and demanding, and woe to the orderly who did not buy into his standards. Of course there was that “we all wear green” thing going on, which may have explained why editorial remarks occasionally appeared in the form of turds well placed in a mop bucket. Nor was there a river to divert, although occasionally a burst pipe created a close approximation. To his credit, Fred never wavered and it was largely due to his influence that the situation remained generally under control. But try as he might even Fred couldn’t think of a way to seque the tasks into the Florence version of the Olympics, for which most of us were eternally grateful.

The Stymphalian Birds

Eurystheus must have had some toxic waste sites in his kingdom because it seemed he had an unending number of genetically contaminated creatures. In this case it was the Stymphalian Birds, which had bronze beaks and metallic feathers (presumably evolved to repel arrows), which they could launch in the direction of anyone whom they deemed to be threatening. In what had to have been the impetus for certain Japanese horror
flicks they also had highly toxic dung. In short, they were a kind of like a genetic cross between Glenn Beck, Ann Coulter, and Rodan.

They were named after Lake Stymphalia, this swampy place that they had overrun and from which they were generally terrorizing the countryside. It wasn’t going to work for Hercules to simply slog into the swamp, as in short order he was going to look like the livestock in the Augean Stables. But since the gods were very interventionist back in those days, Athena stepped in and gave him a rattle to use. That must have been an interesting conversation.

Athena, looking beneficent, “Here, Hercules, take this mighty tool.”

“Milady, (pause) it’s a rattle.”

Athena, looking puzzled, “And? . . .”

“Milady, my children played with these, that is before I killed them.”

Athena, starting to look a bit peeved, “Are you not pleased with my gift?”

“Look,” (frustration overriding the pretense at culture) “it’s a great rattle, but how’s it going to help me with those damn birds?”
Athena, now understanding the problem and giving him her ‘be patient with the dim-bulb demi-god’ look, “It will scare them.”

“Right. They’ll be afraid of dying laughing.”

Athena, now clearly out of patience herself, “You moron; it will scare them so they fly . . . CLOSER!! . . .”

“Oh.”

After using his mighty rattle, the Stymphalian Birds indeed took flight and Hercules was then able to shoot enough of them that the others simply flew off, never to return, that is until the inevitable movie sequel.

The Disoriented Geese

Now Fred only had the Disoriented Geese as potential antagonists. For some reason there was a large flock of geese that seemed to think that a federal prison complex was a safe haven in their migrational patterns. Nothing could have been further from the truth. At the very least there were always those microwaves in the residence units simply begging to be fed. There was also the sporting aspect of seeing whether it was possible to nail a goose with a softball during warm-ups. To be sure the COs could have taken umbrage at having to watch inmates terrorize their genetic relatives, but it simply wasn’t a particularly safe place for the several hundred geese that insisted on settling into the compound each morning. And then
there was that particularly obsessive CO. I think the plumbing could have all frozen solid, the heating systems could have self-immolated, the incidence of ptomaine could have gone off the charts, but let a goose crap on a sidewalk and her entire universe was seriously atilt. Poor Fred ended up the head of the Goose Patrol, that group of inmates whose job it was to perpetually scrape goose and other avian dung off the walks, lest it mar the pristine appearance of the camp. Unlike Hercules’ dilemma, it wasn’t that the dung itself was particularly toxic. It was that particular CO’s priorities that were toxic. In any case, it was Fred’s problem, and he wasn’t given a rattle. The geese prevailed, and more like Sisyphus than Hercules, Fred’s task became both endlessly repetitive and ultimately unresolvable. So he moved on.

**The Cretan Bull**

Let’s face it, the ancient Greeks were notorious bull-shitters. Many of their legends swirled around bulls or bullish characters. When King Minos’ traditional marriage went on the rocks, his wife even went so far as to both fall in love with and engage in bull-based bestiality, thus causing her to give birth to the Minotaur, a man-like creature with the head of a bull, a possible genesis for some modern legislators’ concerns about the waterfall impact of same-sex marriages. In fact, the Greeks seemed to be drawn to just about anything that involved a
bull. They made great sport jumping over their backs, and would occasionally in fits of vengeance arrange for a bull to go rampaging around the countryside. It was one such creature, known as the Cretan Bull, whose capture became Hercules’ next task. It is presumed that this bull was so-named because it was running around Crete, and not because of its status as a cretin, i.e. its lack of bull mental acumen. But, then, Hercules was able to sneak up behind it in mid-rampage and strangle it into submission, so maybe it wasn’t so sharp after all. He then sent it off to good old Eurystheus, who was so frightened by it that he cut it loose in Marathon where it became the Marathonian Bull, presumably terrorizing the members of the local long-distance running club. All in all, this was a pretty easy labor for Hercules and, anyway, Theseus ended up doing all the dirty work when he later killed both the now-Marathonian Bull and the Minotaur, thus cleansing Greece of a whole lot of mythological bullshit.

The Cretinous CO

Fred was not so fortunate. His antagonist was not a Cretan from Crete, but a cretin from Florence. The Cretinous CO had made a career of contriving silly tasks for inmates to perform, particularly the multitude of orderlies charged with maintaining inmate quality of life in the residence units. In a clear reflection of this CO’s cognitive approach to tasks, these jobs
were often very discrete, as with the guy who was responsible for cleaning the four microwaves, and nothing else. One inmate commented that his job was to dust this one about 6-foot section of wall, something that he did very assiduously, about ten minutes a week. Another was responsible for picking up the litter in a four-foot square section of rocks on the outside of the unit, something he did not do assiduously, which eventually caused him to be fired and thrown in the hole. Interestingly, the litter in question was comprised almost exclusively of cigarette butts, once again raising the issue of how they got there in this non-smoking federal facility. But, then, the chain-smoking CO I called Mr. Dyspepsia stood there a lot. I was particularly struck by the old guy with one leg, who was again obviously not disabled, and whose job it was to clean eight small outside windows every now and then, a duty he discharged very responsibly while hopping on one leg, trying to figure out how to simultaneously handle his crutch, a spray bottle, and a rag. Clearly a lot of thought went into job-matching. The general goal was to keep everyone moving, presumably so they didn’t waste time in penitent self-reflection. And once again, it was Fred’s job as Head Orderly to see that the CO’s job assignments were carried out. It was truly a lot of cretinous bull.

The Mares of Diomedes
After the relatively light work involved in subduing the Cretan Bull, Hercules was charged with stealing the Mares of Diomedes. This wouldn’t have been a particularly big deal, were it not for the fact that the mares were psychotic and, by some accounts, breathed fire. In an early attempt to explain the etiology of mental illness it is reportedly significant that the mares were tethered to a bronze manger, with the presumption that they treated it like a salt lick, thus creating a permanent chemical imbalance in their brains. Of course, someone was also busily feeding them human flesh, so it is possible that the prions associated with a human variant of mad cow disease were the real issue. In any case, Hercules took his typical rather direct approach to things and, after chasing the mares to a high pasture, quickly dug a moat around them and filled it with water in order to contain them.

In evaluating his performance on this task it helps to know that Hercules was no fan of the mares’ owner, Diomedes. Regardless of the version of this story that you bump into, when Diomedes showed up to inspect his work, Hercules decided to feed him to his then-starving charges, which had the interesting and seemingly paradoxical effect of calming them. Now tractable and with their mouths duct-taped shut, the mares were taken to Eurystheus, who by this time should have been getting sick of all the various monsters and crazed beasts that Hercules kept
bringing to his castle. But then again, he had assigned these labors in the first place, and was becoming preoccupied with the realization that Hercules simply scared him shitless.

The Femme Fatales of Florence

Strictly speaking, Fred did not have to contend with crazed, cannibalistic female horses in order to discharge his job. But he did end up risking running afoul of the female COs, aka the Femme Fatales of Florence. Being a federal agency, the BOP has decided that there is no reason to keep women from working in exactly the same positions within the prison system as the men. Now as a rule I agree with such policies. But occasionally I think it’s not a bad idea to inject a little context and common sense into such thinking and perhaps modify things a bit. Let’s take the following. There is no sex in the BOP. That is, there is no sex allowed in the BOP. Most of the public assumes that prisoners are accorded conjugal visits with their significant others as a matter of course, but at the prison camp in Florence, nothing could be further than the truth. Physical contact with one’s spouse or partner was limited to a very public quick hug at the beginning and the end of each visit. Nor were even slightly titillating pictures allowed to be displayed in the “privacy” of one’s cement cube, or on the inside of one’s locker. In fact, despite the stated policy of the importance of maintaining family ties, even any
family picture of a spouse, girlfriend, child or grandchild was similarly disallowed, lest it disturb the absolute sterility that is apparently required so that the COs can maintain order. And homosexuality, while not unknown, is not sanctioned. In short, everyone is expected to check his sexuality at the door upon entry to the prison camp, and leave it there for the 1, 2, 10, or 20 years that he will be a resident. I think it’s where the politicians got the idea for their “just say no” approach to family planning, the one that none of them appear to personally follow after election.

Into this testosterone-soaked and sex-starved environment some bright group of administrators decided it made sense to inject female COs. Now I guarantee, if you take a 20-year-old male and tell him he’s going to be locked up for ten years with no legitimate sexual outlet, then have female COs performing pat-downs and strip-searches, there is going to be one hell of a lot of active fantasizing occurring. And as they say, thoughts are the precursors to actions. In short, the psychologist in me says that you are playing with fire, to say the least. As with many other things in the prison camp, I considered it a major tribute to the self-control of the inmates that there were no real incidents while I was there.

That’s not to say there weren’t a few fantasy incidents, most of which seemed to involve the space between the ears of
this one female CO in particular. She was the kind of person who was always on the look-out for an inmate who might say or do something that she possibly could interpret as inappropriate, thus allowing her to exercise her authority and throw that person in the hole. On one occasion I watched her do this with an inmate who had a very obvious tic disorder, one that caused him to scrunch up the right side of face so that it looked like he was winking.

“Did you just wink at me?”

“No,” he replied.

As with many people who have tics, much of the time he wasn’t aware that he was ticcing. In fact, he had just finished “winking” at me, and I had noted a rictus rather than “come on” quality to it.

“I think you winked at me.”

“I did not.”

The inmate was now getting a little agitated, which undoubtedly caused him to tic madly at everything and everyone. It doesn’t matter how many times one is falsely accused, it isn’t something to which you ever get completely numbed.

“I think you did.”

Her own agitation was also growing, and she probably thought his unbridled ticcing was just a smokescreen. She was beginning to work herself up in the “let’s go to the hole”
process when another CO stepped in. He was one of the few who both had a brain and knew how to use it.

“I know this guy. He’s respectful and wouldn’t do something like that.”

The female CO was only slightly mollified, but slowly deflated and the inmate escaped that encounter unscathed. It was one of the few times I saw a CO intervene with one of his or her brethren on behalf of an inmate.

As luck would have it, Fred had to work with this particular female CO on a very regular basis. And Fred was the kind of person who tended to approach relationships very logically and objectively, which only adds to the danger when you are interacting with someone who is neither.

“She scares me,” Fred confided to me one day at lunch, just before his name was called out over the intercom to report to the Interminable Bore. “I’m afraid she’s going to accuse me of something.”

Since my read of her had that as entirely possible, and, in fact, I knew it had already happened, I briefly slipped on my clinical hat before responding.

“I understand. I am careful not to make any eye-contact with her. If I see her coming down the walkway I look off to the side until she has passed.”

“Doesn’t that seem weird?”
I thought for a moment before responding. “Fred, you are living in an environment with 550 guys who mostly do nothing all day but try not to die of boredom, while they are supervised by a bunch of people who spend their work hours trying to find new and different ways to insult and belittle them, but who themselves would be largely unemployable in the real world. Tell me something here that isn’t weird.”

He seemed to reflect on that and wandered off. The last I checked he had survived his almost daily contact with her without having to feed her human flesh or pull out the duct tape. And he never ended up in the hole. Kudos to Fred.

**Belt of Hippolyta**

After Hercules had settled the matter of the Mares of Diomedes, Eurystheus was kind of running out of ideas. In case you’ve lost track, that was eight labors so far, even though Eurystheus had decided not to count two, leaving some four to go. Since his own imagination was flagging, it was good that he had a spoiled daughter who was looking to accessorize and who wanted this really cool belt that belonged to Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons. Eurystheus sent Hercules to get it.

This belt had been a gift to Hippolyta from Ares, the God of War, so it’s not surprising that this particular labor seemed mostly about Hercules committing general murder and mayhem along the way. Anyway, this appeared to be a particular strength area
of his. So he gathered up some more friends and, after he had stopped off for a brew or two with his friend Lycus, taking a bar-break long enough to kill the invading King Mygdon, Hercules and his surviving companions took off to Thermiscyra where they hoped to find the soon-to-be-beltless Hippolyta. They indeed found her and at first she was so impressed with Hercules that she offered to debelt forthwith. But then things got kind of political.

For Hera, this whole thing wasn’t going as planned. She had been watching Hercules knock off one labor after another and was getting increasingly annoyed, and maybe even a little desperate. So she started a negative ad campaign, which caused some of the other Amazons to come rushing to the aid of their not-really-threatened Queen Hippolyta. In other words, negative ads back then seemed to work about like they do in post-Citizen’s United America. This, in turn, caused Hercules to think he was being set up, so he responded in his Herculean predictable way by simply killing Hippolyta and taking her belt. He took it back to Eurystheus who was starting to get serious heartburn about the inability of anyone to get this guy out of his face. So he only paused briefly to score some points with his daughter by passing on the belt, then sent Hercules right back out the door to his next labor.

_The Holy Coat of Fred_
Like many of us, before Fred attained his near-sainted status of Head Orderly, which included Orderly of the Heads as a subset, his job as the Warden’s Fingerprint Remover had allowed him to evolve into the Really Truly Floor Expert of the ADX, this in an environment where the floors had near-deified status. I think you could have burned out the entirety of the prison library or filled the living units with jello and no one would have been particularly upset. But a black mark on the linoleum floors of one of the higher security prisons was almost a cause for an administrative riot. There were several nights when sirens would go off and Fred would be hustled back to his job for emergency scuff removal. It’s possible that the sirens were more related to the latest inmate uprising in some other higher security facility and Fred’s subsequent disappearances were largely coincidental, but we also knew when BOP bigwigs were expected to visit and the ADX in particular was a BOP flagship facility. Fred had worked himself into near-indispensable status, that is until they included him in a group firing after someone did something that annoyed the Warden, then rehired Fred specifically, only to immediately re-fire him just so no one got confused.

But before all that occurred, they found time to hassle their floor expert about the holes in his coat. Of course, this was a coat that had been issued to him in the first place,
complete with the holes in question. Now, the laundry COs weren’t quite as security-conscious as the ones in the ADX, presumable because the ones in laundry actually interacted with inmates and realized that there really were human beings in the green casings. In contrast, inmates were largely a rumor in the ADX, as they existed behind so many layers of doors that it was hard to coordinate sightings.

“Seen Cannibal Carl?”

“He’s still here?”

“Yea, down on C-3, I think. Haven’t seen him in a long time though. Someone requested a book on sautéing bedbugs the other day. I just assumed.”

“Maybe Bonebiter Bob ate him.”

“That would suck.”

“For which one?”

Much laughter. CO humor. It really bites.

Given the high level of concern I saw displayed toward my bunkie with the metal leg, the one who was always waved through the loudly protesting metal detector on his way in and out of the ADX, it made sense that they would worry about the Holy Coat. If they ever found anything rattling around in the lining of that coat, even if it was dated from 1983, it would have meant a quick trip to the hole for Fred. So ever the pragmatist, Fred decided to resolve the issue, and hopefully the threat
along with it. He traded in his coat at the inmate laundry-trading post and was given a new one. This was a really new coat, which meant it was stiff as a board and it was about two sizes too large. Like the boots, it was an important part of the clothing protocol that nothing issued ever fit the particular inmate who received it. After chaffing within it and about it for a couple of weeks, Fred decided to try and solve the problem in a more effective manner. Going down that line of thinking was always dangerous in the Florence Camp, as it could easily lead to a logical solution that would get run through someone’s paranoid sieve, emerging as some distortion of reality that put the inmate at risk. Such was the case with Fred’s Holy Coat.

As luck would have it there was this other inmate who had a very old beat up coat that he had been issued years before. But he wasn’t up to get a new coat any time soon. He took a shine to Fred’s new coat and they made a trade. Now coats were not marked with inmate identifiers in any way so there was no warning that this was considered somewhat felonious inmate behavior. Nor would you think that COs would be closely tuned into a particular inmate’s sartorial selections. But Fred’s profile was such that a CO noticed right away that he had another coat and asked him about it. When he explained what had occurred he was accused of running a “hot coat” ring and
threatened with being thrown in the hole. It was to be the unholy hole for the wholly holy coat. Fred immediately snapped to and retraded his old-new coat back for his new-old-new coat. But he was still left with a coat that didn’t fit and that was very uncomfortable to wear. So he took it back to trade at the sanctioned laundry-trading post. There he was threatened with having stolen his new coat, the one that had been issued to him as a replacement for the original Holy Coat. It was taken and he was left coatless forever more. Fortunately, the weather was heading into summer and Fred was heading to a halfway house before the next winter. So Fred finished his time officially coatless, which gave him one less thing to turn in upon leaving, and one less opportunity to be accused of something. In the world of Florence logic, it was almost a win-win.

The Cattle of Geryon

So after all this it turns out that Eurystheus was nothing but a common cattle thief. But he wasn’t going to do it himself, so he sent Hercules to steal the cattle that belonged to this nonspecific monster named Geryon. Why a monster would want cattle was never clear, but perhaps it was simply to look better by comparison. In my neck of the woods we know how to deal with cattle thieves. It generally involves a rope and a tall tree, and it certainly doesn’t take all this falderol of recasting rustlers as heroic demi-gods. Nor am I quite sure why
a cattle drive is so heroic in the first place, John Wayne’s memory notwithstanding. I know that there was a lot involved for Hercules just getting to Geryon’s herd which was on the remote and potentially mythological island of Erytheia. But, please. Stealing cattle? You would think Eurystheus could have done a whole lot better than that, particularly if he was just looking for a good steak.

I’m sure by now Hercules was sick of these asinine assignments, but you could argue that he should have thought of all that through before he decided to annihilate his children, thus engendering this all-consuming guilt load in the first place. At this point he simply had to go do these crazy things, even if his boss was mired in a bad movie western. So off he went.

Ever the twitchy sort, he encountered a number of things that had to be killed along the way. It seemed like Hercules was stuck in a single-response pattern; if it got in the way, kill it. If it didn’t cooperate, kill it. If he wasn’t sure whether he should or could kill it, kill it to find out. He seemed to function sort of like an adolescent with a new .22. Nor did he display a great deal of general intelligence in his assaults. For example, while crossing the Libyan desert he got so incensed with the heat that he took a pot-shot at the sun with an arrow. There were a number of questionable things about
that effort that seem rather face-evident, when you think about it. Given that Libya is still generally geographically Libya, maybe some of Kaddafi’s seemingly odd behavior has had a similar heat-driven etiology. While not a particularly effective tactic, for some bizarre reason this effort impressed the sun god so much that he gave Hercules his golden cup so that he could successfully sail to Erytheia. OK. Whatever.

Hercules had a little more killing to do before his thievery. Ignoring the cries of the local SPCA he first took out the island’s two-headed watchdog, then the herdsman of the target cows. This got the attention of Geryon, who for some reason had decided to wear three helmets and carry three sets of shields and spears. As I’ve noted before, the decision-making skill demonstrated by some of these guys was really questionable. Granted, maybe he thought that he doing the kind of layering we do in order to cope with Colorado’s unstable weather patterns, but you would think that his fighting ability would have been hampered by all this paraphernalia that he was carting around. Or maybe he was experimenting with a human tank concept. In any case, it didn’t make any difference to Hercules, who had already demonstrated his ability to slaughter just about anything regardless of sartorial issues. If it breathed, he killed it. But in a sop to Geryon’s strange get-up, Hercules had dipped his arrow in the poisonous blood of the
Hydra so that when he drilled the presumably completely immobile Geryon in the forehead all he had to do was create a scratch to accomplish the kill. For that matter he could have probably walked up to him and simply repeatedly beaten him on the head with a hunk of metal and the reverberating sound alone would have turned his brains to mush. But that wouldn’t have been nearly as dramatic, and would not have looked as heroic painted on vases.

With Geryon dead, Hercules the Cow Thief drove the herd back to Eurystheus, but not before Hera threw a few problems his way and delayed him for a year or so. So now Eurystheus had a bunch of cattle to add to his growing menagerie of monsters and general protoplasmic malcontents. The word is that the cows got sacrificed to Hera, which sort of raises the question of why she was so busily blocking Hercules’ return if they were headed to her anyway. It’s best not to look at some of this history too closely, kind of like our descriptions of modern wars that we say we’ve won.

The Chattelian Carts

I think we’ve pretty clearly established that there were no cattle on the Florence compound, either inside or outside the dining room. And with the preoccupation with protein that abounded among the inmates, any cow that had the temerity to wander in from the back fields would likely have been treated
like a parked vintage Chevy and stripped down to its hooves. Then the microwaves would have hummed for a week. But while no cattle, there was plenty of chattel, in all its linguistic forms. The inmates themselves were the kind of chattel that one typically associates with pre-Civil War politics. But that wasn’t the chattel that drove Fred to distraction. Fred’s bane emanated from the usage of the word that means moveable assets, in this case the large dumpsters that existed outside of the living units, the Chattelian Carts.

Now these carts were used for collecting all the refuse generated by the 300 or so inmates that lived in each of the two base living units. That’s quite a bit of garbage. Added to that were the fruits of the many shakedowns performed by the COs during the week, and anything that was being retired from BOP usage, like perfectly good chairs that had to be thrown out so that the chair shortage could be properly sustained. The result was very large overflowing dumpsters that had to be rolled out the front of the compound on a daily basis. The alleged target area was the Recycling Center, an interestingly named place, made even more interesting by the fact that nothing on the compound was ever sorted for recycling and it was unclear how much actual recycling occurred. I think it was named that way so that it could look like the BOP was ecologically friendly on their web-site.
In fact, the Recycling Center was where the garbage went, which included all the perfectly good appliances that were being upgraded. Granted, this was combed through by the inmates who worked there so that some important things could be recycled back into the inmate population, things like food that had been slipped out the back door of the kitchen. It was kind of distribution central for the inmates and was considered a very dangerous place to work. While fully aware of all this, most of the time the COs in charge simply didn’t pay much attention to what was going on there, as that required effort that was an apparent violation of their employment contracts. However, they did ascribe to a random group punishment model. Just to let the inmates know they were only invisible and not dead, the COs would occasionally line up the cards of who was working on that day and take every third person to the hole. While some inmates found the trade-off of access to all sorts of stuff for occasional solitary confinement acceptable, most did not. At least one I knew absolutely refused that job assignment which, of course, resulted in threats of a trip to the hole, the very thing he was trying to avoid.

But the Recycling Center wasn’t Fred’s issue, it was the freaking multi-cubic yard carts that had to be rolled off the compound each day with stuff frequently spilling over their sides, and which were heavier than hell. In a real business,
especially one that had multiple motor-driven contrivances that could be utilized to haul things, this task would have been approached mechanically. But when you have 12-cents-an-hour labor at your disposal, it’s becomes cheaper not to use the gas. And if the task is physically challenging enough there’s always a chance that you can cut down on your labor maintenance costs. So it was Fred’s job to see that some inmate rolled these large dumpsters out the gate each morning, off to the Recycling Center. Just to make it a bit more challenging there was typically only one person allocated to each cart, and the journey was all uphill. As I observed this, it seemed that it was usually the older guys who got this assignment, and I started carrying my CPR card with me at all times, although I certainly wouldn’t have been allowed to intervene anyway. As time went on, I noticed that Fred himself seemed to be frequently doing this job, which made some sort of sense. Fred was a body builder and even though we was an older inmate (one of The Gray Geezers, as some of us called ourselves), he was probably the strongest guy on the compound and able to accomplish this task without needing a later IV drip of ibuprofen. To this day I carry the image of Fred toiling up the hill dragging one of the dumpsters, with a strap around his forehead and long ropes training behind him encasing the cart. It was a mythological Herculean scene, Fred versus the
Chattelian Carts. However, in the mixed mythology of camp life there were overtones of Sisyphus rolling his rock, as each day Fred awoke to find that the carts had been magically relocated, and the task began anew at the bottom of the hill.

The Apples of the Hesperides

Now that Hercules had established himself as an accomplished cow and horse thief, Eurystheus decided to turn him loose in the orchards of the Hesperides, a group of nymphs who hung out in the Atlas Mountains of North Africa. This orchard actually belonged to Hera and, most likely in an effort to get her to stop screwing around and finally get Hercules out of his life, Eurystheus charged Hercules with ripping Hera off by stealing her golden apples. There is some later developing confusion in mythological circles about whether these apples might have actually been oranges, a rumor some historians think was started by the Florida Chamber of Commerce.

Over the years, I have found myself wondering if there was an equivalent to snopes.com back in antiquity, somewhere that we could verify some of this stuff that people were being sold about heroes like Hercules. It just seemed like an awful lot for one guy to pull off in a lifetime, even if he was a heroic demi-god type. Nowadays when you see that line “based on a true story” at the beginning of a completely unbelievable movie you can use the web to immediately check it out and get the “real”
facts. Often the difference is substantial. Who did they use to fact-check on Hercules? And perhaps more importantly, did he ever run for office?

It’s also not lost on me that here we have another one of those stories where a woman and apples figure prominently. Someone must have gotten the idea that apples were an aphrodisiac of some kind, the same kind of thinking that even in this post-Viagra world is causing rhinoceri and multiple other species to go extinct as men mindlessly harvest their horns. Otherwise, why the preoccupation with apples that belong to attractive women?

For Hercules, this was another one of those tasks where just finding the place to commit the crime was going to be a challenge, since Eurystheus hadn’t given him any idea where in North Africa the Gardens of Hesperides were located. And even back then they knew Africa was kind of big. But Hercules had his ways. He simply captured this shape-shifting pre-Hemmingway god known as the Old Man of the Sea and waterboarded him to get the information. Presumably it turned out to be more reliable than the stuff the CIA got on WMDs. And, per usual, before he could get to the orchards he had a murder or two to commit in transit.

Some say he ran into Antaeus, the son of Gaia the Earth Mother and that, rather predictably, they got into a “whose is
bigger” tussle. But Antaeus had a trick straight out of WWF. As long as he could keep one foot on the ground he was invincible. Not to worry, Hercules just picked him up off the ground and squeezed him into a twinkie.

Then it was on to Egypt, where King Busiris somehow managed to get Hercules chained up, with the intent of making him the subject of a ritualistic yearly sacrifice. Again, no biggee for Hercules. He simply burst his chains, killing Busiris and just about anyone else within reach, and creating a bunch more great vase images in the process. Obviously Busiris hadn’t been paying attention to Hercules’ press releases.

So Hercules finally made it to the Garden of Hesperides. Here the historical facts differ, kind of like what happens when the two dominant political parties in America pull their heads out long enough to actually comment on issues. Some say that Hercules just had to kill a dragon in order to get the apples, which we have clearly established was right in line with his skill set. A more involved version has Hercules tricking Atlas (who had access to the apples) by first agreeing to hold up the heavens while Atlas fetched them, then, after Atlas had decided to keep the apples, “temporarily” handing the heavens back under the auspices of adjusting his cloak. Add accomplished deceit to killing and thievery to his resume. Hercules was truly a renaissance man.
But get the apples he did and took them to the now thoroughly frustrated and frightened Eurystheus. What he wanted with a bunch of wannabe oranges in the first place is unclear. Perhaps he intended to use them to feed the monsters and livestock that were overflowing his castle, or to get into trouble with some woman.

The Apples of the Café Florence

Stealing apples wasn’t an issue simply for Fred, but for anyone who ate regularly at the Café Florence. It was one of those times when the written regulations rarely, if ever, were followed. Each CO seemed to have his or her particular interpretation of those regulations, and it was generally left to the inmates to try to follow the bouncing ball. The regulation in question involved taking fruit from the dining hall for later consumption.

Inmates didn’t have a whole lot of other things to do, so they tended to obsess on their diets, and Fred was certainly prominent in this category. Those who spent most of their free time on the weight pile chased protein, while others either attempted to liberate quantities of food from the kitchen for later resale or engaged in simple hoarding. But some inmates just wanted to take food that had been given to them for their meals out of the dining room so they could enjoy it later. For the most part the COs cared little about this, since much of the
sequestered food could be confiscated by them later during shakedowns, presumably particularly when they were feeling in need of a snack. It was kind of a “live and let live” arrangement. But other COs felt that the freeing of any food from the dining hall represented a major threat to national security and behaved accordingly. This led to some vaguely humorous episodes, like the many times that the aforementioned frozen pastry would be handed out during breakfast. Not wanting to break their teeth, most inmates simply stuck it in their pockets so it could be eaten after it had thawed. But, then, the more aggressive COs who enjoyed lining up at the exit door would look for the pocket bulges and confiscate the contraband, perhaps putting them in the kitchen so they could be put back in the freezer to be handed out the next day. It was a combination of recycling and cost-containment at work.

Yet the regulations clearly stated that inmates were allowed to take one piece of fruit out of the dining hall, and the fruit in question was often an apple. And since the COs couldn’t seem to get on the same page, there was a conflict building. At one point someone higher up the food chain got sufficiently exercised about the issue that they tried to unilaterally eliminate the rule, but someone even higher decided that such a direct violation of alleged national standards was perhaps unwise. It never seemed to occur to them that it was
just plain stupid. It’s not like the apples were being allowed to rot then thrown at the COs later. In fact, in many cases they were simply confiscated by hungry COs during later room searches. In any case, the policy was reinstated, leaving some less hungry COs feeling like their authority had been seriously undermined. The tension built even more, although to what point was completely unclear. A massive food fight seemed unlikely.

In stepped the OCD CO, with all of her problem-solving acumen. In what she probably saw as a compromise, she instructed the kitchen staff to cut a slice in all the apples before serving them, not quite halving them, but making sure that the air could access them and turn them brown before they were served. Although it always scared me to try to enter her thinking processes without a guide dog, I suspect this was her way of saying to the inmates, “Go ahead, take the apple out of the dining hall. But if you do, it will be pretty unappetizing when you go to eat it later.” For that matter, eating an apple that had been browning for an hour before being handed out already pushed the borders of appetizing. Of course you could try to use the dull plastic silverware to try to scrape off the brown, or just rub it on the cement once you were outside of the door, trying to avoid the goose poop, but there was something seriously appetite-killing about the whole process by that point.
So Ms. OCD prevailed and, while not eliminated, the “theft” of apples from the dining hall was slowed to a trickle. The Hesperides would have been proud. But it is said that Fred wept.

**Cerebrus**

For those of us who are keeping score, I have it now as Hercules 11 and Eurystheus 0. It didn’t matter what pitches Eurystheus threw at him, Hercules just kept knocking them out of the park. Hercules had proved himself equally adept at murder, mayhem, thievery, and even advanced janitorial services. It was resume building at its finest. At this point Eurystheus was at his wits end, but, after all, he was a career politician and presumably hadn’t gotten to being a king without having a passing knowledge of human psychology. Playing strictly against type, Eurystheus decided to see if Hercules could embrace his less militant and more feminine side, and sent him to capture Cerberus, the multi-headed dog who guarded the gates of the underworld, that region where death reigned. To balance the testosterone effect he expressly forbade Hercules from using weapons of any kind to accomplish this. In short, Eurystheus turned the most famous mythological personage of his time into his personal dogcatcher.

To be fair, it needs to be pointed out the Cerberus was generally considered to be just about the baddest creature
around. While this could be seen as some sort of psychological reflection of humans’ attitudes toward the world of death in general, it seems that just about everyone was afraid of crossing this multi-monster beast. So by charging Hercules to capture it by only using his artifice and guile, it is likely that Eurystheus was presuming the whole thing would finally end in a spectacular, one might say Herculean, failure.

And once again there were some ancillary wrinkles that arose as Hercules set about completing this task. For example, he first had to be initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries, so that he could figure out how get in and out of the underworld without actually dying. He used an alternate route into Hades, eschewing the services of Charon (whose job it was to ferry the dead into the underworld), holding Charon at bay by the use of a reverse Davy Crockett intimidating glower. I suspect Charon’s personal diary has a slightly different account, as it is unlikely that he particularly cared if someone tried to get into Hades early.

After working his way through the landscape of the dead, Hercules bumped into another couple of hero types (Theseus and Pirithous) who had been derailed in their attempts to kidnap the desirable Persephone, the wife of King Pluto. These guys were always getting into one scrape or another. Boys will be boys. But why anyone would feel compelled to travel to Hades to seek
feminine companionship is beyond me. And why Hercules would elect to save them from such an asinine choice is equally baffling. But for some reason he decided to take a shot at it. He was able to extract Theseus from a Chair of Forgetfulness, minus some thigh meat, but left Pirithous as a consolation prize. In short, it was pretty much business as usual for Hercules; kill some, maim some, leave some to rot in Hell.

Then he got to Pluto, the King of Hades. In a very uncharacteristic fashion, he tried his hand at diplomacy and simply asked Pluto if he could have Cerberus, explaining the "no weapons" clause under which he was being forced to function. Said Pluto, "Have at it," I’m sure assuming that there wasn’t a chance in hell, so to speak, that Hercules could pull it off, Cerberus being such a really, really bad dude-thing. But Hercules had his own WWF moves and simply wrestled Cerberus into submission, an event probably representing the low point of Cerberus’ career. True to his word, Pluto let Hercules cart Cerberus out of Hades and back to Eurystheus.

So here comes Hercules, waltzing into Eurystheus’ castle, dragging the now-subdued Cerberus behind him like a Toy Schnauzer. This was the tipping point for Eurystheus. He took one look at this fearsome creature and, ever the manly man, jumped into a nearby large jar. It is presumed that there ensued some conversation like the following.
“Get that thing away from me!” this delivered in muffled tones through the thick ceramic sides of the jar.

“Sire, I’m having trouble hearing you . . . did you say ‘fig?’”

“THING, I said Thing!! Get that thing out of here.”

“‘But, Sire, it is as you wished. I have brought Cerberus to you.”

“Are you some kind of a freakin’ nut job? Did you think I really meant it? I’ve already got all these cattle running around, these crazy-ass Mares that keep eating the servants, those half-metal birds rotting in the kitchen because the cooks don’t know what to do with them, and after I gave her that belt, my daughter has been completely insufferable. Now you have the brass balls to haul in this frikkin’ nightmare?”

“But, Sire . . .”

“Enough! You win! I’m done . . . Just get the hell out of here, and please TAKE THAT THING BACK!”

So Hercules did.

CO-Berus

Just as overcoming the multi-headed Cerberus was considered Hercules’ greatest challenge, Fred had to deal with the CO-Berus, the COs who guarded the gate that was both the entrance to and the exit from the underworld that was the camp. And just as Hercules had been disarmed, it was greatly frowned upon for
inmates to possess or use weapons. I think the administration was also concerned the COs might confiscate them and shoot each other in a game of tag. But in Fred’s case, this battle was not physical per se, but psychological. One could consider all the COs to be the various heads of a single malignant organism, one whose primary goal seemed to be putting as many obstacles as possible in place between inmates and a successful return to society. It was kind of like the reverse of rehabilitation, which is the real defining characteristic of our current prison system. Like Hades, it was very clear that once a human had entered the realm of the federal prison camp, no return was anticipated. And, at least metaphorically, the Warden was the king of that realm.

So, like all of us, it was Fred’s final task to attempt to survive any of the traps that were put there to snare the unwary, until he could pass back through the portals of the underworld and rejoin what attempts to pass itself off as polite society these days, taking its lead from AM talk radio shows. And just as Pluto was confident that Hercules would never have success in subduing Cerberus, the Warden was equally confident that Fred would never survive his encounters with the many-headed CO-Berus. After all, the Warden generally ignored the COs, allowing them an amazingly wide latitude in their behaviors, some of which bordered on low-grade sadism.
One example in particular springs to mind, a “fire drill” that defied several aspects of common sense. It occurred at about nine pm, just as people were going to bed in their cubes in preparation for the ten o’clock national count. One guy was in the shower when a major hullabaloo broke out, with COs running around driving everyone out of the building and you could overhear the exchange.

“Out – everybody out. Fire drill!”

“You, in the shower ---- outside!”

“I’m in the shower.”

“Outside!!”

“Why?”

“It’s a fire drill!! Outside ---- Now!!”

“Where’s the safest place to be in a fire? I have water falling on me.”


“Outside!!”

“Oh, for the love of God!”

The inmate donned a towel and went outside. It was rather chilly outside. I didn’t have a coat and I was cold. He was dripping wet, naked, and wearing a towel. We were outside for a half hour while they did their “fire drill.” It’s worth noting that “fire drill” was a typical CO euphemism for “we are going to toss your cubes, presumably looking for snacks, possibly
because we are bored and hungry.” That, coupled with the concrete construction of the building, helped explain the showering inmate’s lack of enthusiasm about being saved from potential immolation.

Many fire drills later, and despite the seemingly insurmountable odds confronting him, Fred prevailed and the time came when he walked back through the gates of Hell and into the unfettered Colorado sunshine. He wasn’t able to put a leash on the CO-Berus to take it/them with him, but at one point he did offer to meet it/them in an empty parking lot later if they wished to discuss his performance of his labors.

Now for having finally discharged all his various, rather bizarre labors, Hercules was granted immortality and given a goddess to marry. Fred? There were times when in surviving the whole experience his actions seemed no less heroic. But all he got was an advanced case of heartburn, and a symbolic red “F” for “Felon” tattooed on his forehead for life. It did help him with any lingering identity issues, as when asked during job interviews at McDonalds, he just said it stood for “Fred.”
After my escape from the bowels of the modern Alcatraz I reported for work in the education department. I wasn’t exactly sure what my job was going to entail, but I figured it would have something to do with trying to educate someone. That proved to sort of be the case, although there were numerous unanticipated barriers that existed between any fantasies and implementation.

The first thing I was told by my orienting tutor was to never forget that I wore green. Now this may seem like a simple piece of advice, but it is perhaps the most important lesson that any inmate can learn in a prison camp. Behind the fence there may be certain hierarchies that exist, where shot-callers are recognized by inmates and COs alike as having the license to speak for groups. But in the camp there is no such hierarchy, and any inmate who forgets this is walking a fine line. If you are paying attention at all, you realize that the perception of being too close to the COs can easily lead to rumors that one is
a “rat,” at the very least. So the last thing you want is to be seen as one of “them.”

As a nominal tutor who functioned more as a teacher, this created some interesting dynamics. I had taught both undergraduates and graduates in college on and off for about 20 years prior to being incarcerated, so I thought I had some loose idea of how to approach it. But when you are a teacher in the real world you actually have a little bit of authority over your students (except in today’s public schools where we appear to have decided to completely disempower our teachers in the pursuit of academic excellence). In the prison camp, you have precisely none. Nor should you ever, under any circumstances, try to develop any. Add to that the strange motivational issues that emerge when you have adults being forced to take GED classes under penalty of the loss of privileges, and it becomes a challenge. I learned this in short order.

No sooner had I started my tutoring position than all the other tutors except one disappeared. One was taken out in the middle of the night on a writ. This occurs when the government decides that they can force someone who has taken a plea deal to testify against someone else and transfers them to a county jail. Since virtually every plea deal comes with the understanding that the person can be pulled on a writ at any time, this is not an uncommon occurrence, one that inevitably
breeds a certain amount of suspicion among the other inmates that the person was a mole or a rat all along. Three days after he got to his destination, this tutor ended up testifying in a civil trial. But he didn’t say what they wanted him to say (because he didn’t think it was true), which ticked off the prosecutors, so they kept him in the county lock-up and decided to avoid returning him to the camp.

He was a very big man, about 6 feet 5 inches and 240 pounds when he left. Four months later when he got back he was down below 200 and looked like a walking corpse. He told several stories about his experience that made me very glad that I had bankrupted myself by going to trial, rather than admitting to something I hadn’t done, thereby making a plea deal, and inadvertently risking such a midnight relocation.

To begin with, they had chained all these guys together (which, as a very dangerous accountant he found an interesting experience) then eventually had them shuffle on board a plane for transportation to the Salt Lake City airport, where they made them stand on the tarmac during a snowstorm wearing only T-shirts for about an hour. One of the COs looked at him, while wearing a comfy down coat, and said,

“I bet you wish you had one of these.”
Had my friend not been suffering from weather-induced brain freeze he would have offered to do this COs next year’s taxes for free.

My friend was trying to do his two-year sentence without worrying his wife and family unduly, so never wanted them to visit, even at the camp. After a month or two of this same message in his local jail his family had had enough and went to the jail where they got to chat over a TV monitor. His brother took one look at the black-striped clothes that he was wearing (yes, really) and said,

“You look really stupid.”

His wife was even more direct. She took one look at the emaciated version of her husband and completely freaked out. She was in her Congressman’s office the next day, raising hell about what was going on. This kicked off an investigation and he was called in to meet the administrators of the jail.

“We understand that you are depressed and suicidal,” they said after bringing him into a room.

They had apparently deduced this from his weight loss, since they hadn’t bothered to actually talk to him. But this man was a very devout Mormon who truly thought of his incarceration as a silly and unjust annoyance in this ultimately
inconsequential material life. In terms of a mental health lethality index, his suicidality rating was below zero.

He said, “I’m not depressed – I’m hungry.”

It seemed that the one-slice of baloney sandwich twice a day regimen simply couldn’t sustain his frame.

That reassured the administrators that all was well, as the only thing that seems to truly concern the people who run these places is whether someone is going to get killed or commit suicide on their watch, that or manage to get a hold of a cell phone, possibly to order a pizza.

Fortunately, while he had angered the prosecutors with his refusal to endorse their facts, it had only taken four months to coordinate the transportation for his return to the camp, where he ate steadily for several weeks. At least in the federal camps one gets fed.

About the same time that this guy was spirited off to help promote some prosecutor’s career, another of the tutors who was an attorney on the outside had developed prostate cancer. He was also shipped off, this time to another camp where there were rumors of actual medical treatment, as that camp was largely populated by inmates who were seriously, and often terminally, ill. In this country we have apparently decided that regardless of alleged crime, it is important for inmates to die in
captivity, lest one escape the full measure of a court-mandated sentence.

That left only one other tutor, and he had started about two weeks before me. He seized the opportunity presented by my sudden appearance and retreated to a back room, leaving about 80% of the class management to me. I was so glad to have escaped the ADX kitchen that I would have taught all day every day in Swahili if so directed.

I set about trying to get my sea legs, which took some serious adjusting. I think I fully realized the level of my powerlessness in this situation when I was lecturing and one of the guys in the back row heard a song he liked on his headphones, took them off, cranked them up, and set them on a desk in front of him so that everyone could hear it. I had to decide between direct competition and singing harmony. I got compliments on my voice.

Eventually I settled into the GED curriculum and remained a tutor/teacher for the next two years. Over time there was considerable turnover among the tutors and we developed quite a working group. Some specialized in math, some in essay writing, and some in language arts. And we even had some motivated students. Once they figured out that we weren’t there to be a continuation of their prior negative educational experiences, many took advantage of the opportunity to learn. All in all, it
proved to be one of the more meaningful experiences I was to have in my camp life.

But that doesn’t mean it was all peaches and cream. We still had to deal with some of the COs who either perceived the education department as a threat or simply didn’t see it as having any value at all. It’s human nature to devalue that with which you have no real personal experience.

I was sitting in the classroom one day when the doctoral-level psychologist who had been running the substance-abuse treatment program for the last eight years stuck his head in the door and asked, “Where’s the law library?” At first I thought he was kidding, but he wasn’t. Dumbstruck, I simply pointed to the room next door that was full of books, the one where four inmates were busily typing legal briefs.

While the psychologist seemed to simply not know that we existed, some of the COs knew that we were there, to our detriment, like the time I lost my bag. I had taken to carrying a book bag that I had purchased at the commissary. I tried to spend as little of my time as possible in my cube, and would load this bag up with my piano music, Spanish books, and other stuff that I had organized, utilizing old incoming mail manila folders that had my name on them. Since we weren’t allowed to carry such things into the lunchroom I took to setting my bag on top of a library shelf during meals, asking whoever was in there
if they were going to be around for a while to keep an eye on it. No one seemed to mind. I followed this practice for about five months. Then one day I went to pick it up and it was gone. One of the inmates sitting there told me, “Jenkins took it to the bubble.”

This was an image all in itself. Jenkins was about five feet tall wearing his Sylvester Stallone boots and my bag had been put on top of an eight-foot shelf. He would have had to get a chair and jump to even see it. Off I went to the bubble to retrieve it.

I found him in the visiting room and asked if he had seen my bag. He pulled it out from under the counter and started going through it.

“What’s your name?”

“Crabbe.”

“What?”

Here we go again.

“Crabbe.”

He kept rummaging around and was having trouble matching my name to Beethoven, Brahms, and Debussy. Nor was he having any better luck matching it to the “Crabbe” that was written in capital letters on about six large manila envelopes.

“So, you do legal work for guys?”
I didn’t, and this was a trap question. Technically, an inmate can help another inmate do legal work, but he can’t carry the other guy’s materials around or he will get a “shot,” a disciplinary write-up. Nor can one do it as a business, or a “hustle,” as it’s known in the parlance. I think he thought I was helping this guy named Brahms work on his appeal.

“I try to stay out of inmate commerce,” I replied.

“What?”

I repeated it. He laughed, either because he thought I had said it oddly or because he thought I was lying. COs always think you’re lying, partly because they spend so much time interacting with their peers.

He was back to rummaging and still struggling with the name issue.

“What’s your name again?”

I decided to take him off the hook.

“Crabbe – you don’t pronounce the “e.””

Now he got it.

“Debussy’s my father.”

That, he didn’t get.

“Don’t leave your bag around. The inmates around here will steal it in a second.”

One doesn’t argue with COs. I didn’t point out that for five months I had been leaving my bag in the library during
lunch and so far the only person to steal it was a CO. I could have added that it was also the COs who made it a habit of stealing things out of our personal lockers on a regular basis during their numerous shakedowns. I simply took the bag, thanked him for his timely intervention, and inventoried it carefully upon leaving.

After that I always locked my bag in the large locker in the classroom, one to which only the tutors and teacher had the combination. I was afraid another CO would grab it. But even that turned out to create a problem.

One day I went into the classroom to retrieve my bag, where there were about four nattily attired guys talking to the teacher. They were there to do a conversion of the law library to an electronic database. Thinking nothing of it, I unlocked the tutor’s locker, took out my bag, and went off to play the piano in the chapel.

Later that day I was back in the classroom and the teacher said to me,

“Crabbe, you’re killing me.”

“How so?” With this CO, such thoughts never crossed my mind.

“Those guys were all over me after they saw you unlock that locker.”
“The tutors’ locker? The one where we put all our teaching materials?”

“Yeah.”

I could see that she wasn’t really upset, but I still found this whole thing a bit odd.

“Do they know there are about 50 lockers like that on the compound and that the inmates who work in those areas always have the combinations?”

Logic, logic. Silly me.

She shook her head.

“They’re from behind the fence and don’t get it at all.”

“You know,” I said, “I’ve realized that I simply can’t ever think paranoid enough for this place.”

That may have been the single most lucid insight I had while living at the camp. From that point on I always looked very carefully to make sure there were no unknown suited types around before ever unlocking the tutors’ locker so that I could do my job.

But these incidents were benign when compared to the ones involving the COs who not only knew we education people were there, but were clearly not at all thrilled about it. This created tension between the teacher and certain of the COs who seemed hell-bent on throwing a monkey wrench into her planning. As usual, this was played out with typical BOP panache. And, as
with all such conflicts, the inmates found themselves caught squarely in the middle.

As tutors we were supposed to be in the education area during the day. If not actually teaching, we were supposed to be in the library. But a CO called Mr. Dyspepsia hadn’t signed on to this plan. I should point out that Mr. Dyspepsia was not his real name, but a moniker I had hung on him in my own mind, due to his chronically depressed and angry demeanor, one that was fueled by his apparent alcoholism and expressed through his chain-smoking. One day Mr. Dyspepsia saw some tutors sitting at the table in the library reading and descended like a hawk on baby sparrows. The door was opened.

“Everybody out!”

As luck would have it, the teacher was gone, something that happened pretty frequently and (for us) unpredictably. We looked at each other and apparently didn’t move fast enough.

“There’s no reading in here! This is a Law Library! Everybody out!!”

No reading in a library. Even for the BOP that was a good one. But one did not get between Mr. Dyspepsia and the dictates of reason unless you wanted to risk dying from second-hand smoke during a testicular-threaten ing pat-down. So we left. Once out of the library we were now technically out-of-bounds, as there
were insufficient chairs in the classroom and we weren’t authorized to be anywhere else, an offense that could potentially result in a shot or trip to the hole.

As this was unfolding I was reminded of a story that a guy had told me about how his crime had occurred, the one that got him eight months of incarceration at the camp. He had been camping in a National Park. He set up his tent and settled back to have a couple of beers, well, maybe a few more than a couple. A ranger came along and pointed out to him that he had put his tent in the wrong place and would need to move it down the road in the campground. The ranger offered to lead him to a different campsite. So, he packed up his stuff and followed the ranger. The ranger showed him the new site, let him unpack some of his stuff, then wrote him a ticket for a federal DUI as he left. Have a nice day.

Fortunately for us, before we could get a shot for being out of bounds the teacher returned. She about blew her cork and immediately went outside to look at the sign over the library door. It said very clearly “Liesure/Law Library.” I decided that it wasn’t the best time to point out to her the incongruity of having “leisure” misspelled on the library sign, something I had been meaning to mention. She took off toward the Camp Administrator, leaving a vapor trail in her wake. We didn’t see Mr. Dyspepsia for quite a while in the education wing after
that, although we knew that he was always lurking in the dark corners waiting to pounce.

Mr. Dyspepsia wasn’t the only CO to have issues with the library. This was an area that was subject to frequent searches, probably because they assumed that inmates were hollowing out books in which they could hide their cell phones. Usually these searches were inconsequential affairs that required minimal cleanup. But one day was different.

I heard some strange sounds that seemed to be coming from the other side of the wall and made the mistake of opening the connecting door between the classrooms and the library, surprising a Lieutenant who was in the process of completely trashing the library. I was so nonplussed by the sight of this guy, obviously wrapped in the trappings of BOP authority and standing about knee-deep in the absolute mess that he was creating that I just stood there for several seconds. He turned to me, with a strangely feral gleam in his eye.

“Yessss?

He looked slightly feverish and conjured up images of a decompensating Jack Nicholson in “The Shining.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled, and immediately backed out.

From behind the closed door I could hear the renewed crashing sounds. I figured it must have been the BOP form of literary criticism.
After several hours of this the guy left and we went inside to assess the damages. It looked like the aftermath of a category three hurricane. There were books piled haphazardly in about a four-foot mound on the table, those that hadn’t been simply strewn around the floor. All the shelves were pulled away from the walls and several had clearly been torn off and thrown on top of the books. There was a locked portal in the ceiling that was now hanging down, presumably to facilitate inmate access to the attic area so that they could more easily move their contraband. But the saddest part was that he had apparently found it important to uproot and destroy a creeping charlie plant that had been lovingly cultivated for about five years and was about 40 feet long. It was toast.

When you encountered these kinds of episodes in the camp it was important to put them in the context of the role-modeling that is a part of all CO orientation and training. They are told that they are expected to be shining examples of civilized behavior for the inmates to emulate. For what it’s worth, the public can be reassured that the inmates I saw had far better self-control and common sense than to emulate the COs. Otherwise, upon their discharge our society would seriously be at risk.

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While teaching GED classes was our primary job duty, this wasn’t the only activity offered under the auspices of the Education Department. There was one combination class in business and accounting offered by the local junior college and for which inmates could actually accrue college credits. Of course, only about 18 people could take that class at a time and there was a pool of around 300 potentially interested candidates. The teacher was also good about accommodating people who had enough money to take college correspondence courses for credit. But then, Pell grants had long since dried up for inmates and at their salary of 12-cents-an-hour each $200 expense related to coursework required about 1600 work hours, a little more than 10 months of full-time labor. Since their income also had to buy extra clothing, shoes, radios, copy credits, postage, and any optional food or snacks, for some reason the expense greatly reduced the pool of participants.

But at the Florence Camp the best offerings were called ACE classes, which counted toward the program credits that were tracked at every inmate’s team meeting, and which were taught by other inmates. This was interesting. Since we now incarcerate a lot of highly skilled and older citizens, there were many inmates with a range of experience in a wide variety of areas. Many had financial backgrounds, everything from banking and investment strategies to business development and management.
Only in the American justice system would we incarcerate people for alleged financial crimes (with an emphasis on the “alleged”), then have them teaching classes in the very areas where they had ended up under government sanction while on the outside. Given this approach to curriculum management, I was surprised there wasn’t an ACE class in how to most effectively cut, market, and distribute cocaine.

I particularly enjoyed the segment in one business development class where Fast Eddie from Boston taught us all about how to repair and rebuild our credit after our incarceration. After going several losing rounds with the federal government, which had annihilated most all of our life savings and brought us to the brink of bankruptcy, many of us found this to be invaluable advice.

Fast Eddie may have had the credit stuff nailed down and was essentially helping the BOP to meet their curriculum requirements free of charge, but this didn’t give him a pass with the COs. One day he blew a varicose vein in his lower leg. He was spouting blood around, which caused something of a stir in the living unit. An orderly was watching, aghast, as all the towels and rags that he had carefully husbanded in order to do his job were being used to try to stem the red tide. One of the Case Managers immediately recognized the true budding crisis and
took charge of the situation, utilizing his own version of triage.

He yelled, “Step away from the towels!”

We didn’t think he necessarily meant the bloody ones.

After everyone settled down a bit, Fast Eddie was literally heaved onto a cart and driven to medical. But there had been blood, and that meant that there must have been a fight.

Actually, there were very few fights on the compound, something I found rather remarkable given the combination of scarcity of shared resources and stressed out males that defined the experience. Just because there were so few fights didn’t keep the COs from looking for them, or for any other reason to send someone to the hole. It seemed like they were searching for any excuse they could find to exercise discipline, perhaps simply needing to assert authority and continuously convince themselves that they were in control. I think it’s the same logic the government uses and is why it has created thousands and thousands of laws that Americans unwittingly break every day.

On the compound, it was an unwritten rule that you should report any injury, no matter how minor, to the COs. Otherwise, if they saw it later it would be presumed that you had been in a fight. This wasn’t something that you were ever told by them or that you would ever normally think of, so usually you were at
risk until someone else told you about it. Shortly into my stay I was playing basketball and guarding this big guy in the post. Post play in basketball is by nature a bit physical and somewhere in there we clocked each other going for a rebound. He ended up with a black eye and me with a bruised arm, so maybe it was more the case that I clocked him, albeit inadvertently. Not knowing the “rule,” neither of us reported it, and it was his efforts to explain his subsequent obvious shiner that brought the rule to our attention. He barely averted the hole on that one.

It’s worth noting that as I age I am always finding bruises and cuts on my body and can’t figure out how they got there. Pain receptors aren’t as sensitive as they once were and my skin seems to tear when I breathe on it. It’s one of the ways that aging works against you in the prison environment. Being mostly very young, I think the COs are missing an in-service on this one. On at least one occasion they came through our living units, making us all stand up with our shirts off and hands extended while they examined us for cuts and bruises. Apparently they had found what they thought was one end of a fight and were looking for the other. They never found the presumed culprit and, given our elderly population, I almost asked them the age of the alleged victim.
With all this preoccupation about potential fisticuffs and injuries, for Eddie and his blown vein it was inevitable that there would be an investigation. But mercifully for him, it was short. Later that day one of the COs searched him out in medical, perhaps frustrated that he had lost a betting opportunity. He approached the recuperating Fast Eddie.

“So, who were you fighting with?”

Fast Eddie, in his inimitable Boston twang, pointed to the bandage on his lower leg and said, “I was hit by a dwaaaf.”

We were all pleased when the camp credit specialist avoided a trip to the hole for excessive bleeding.

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There were a number of these ACE courses and it was warming to get a BOP-sanctioned certificate for the completion of our advanced financial training. My wife and I soon realized that I had virtually immediate access to far more cost-effective, and often better, financial advice while incarcerated than she did using more normal channels. If funds got really tight on the outside, we decided that one of us could always commit a petty offense just to get updated.

Of course, some of the ACE coursework was of a different ilk and was primarily designed to simply give us a way to pass the time. This created its own kind of tension, particularly anything that involved watching movies. As a rule, inmates are
bored out of their minds, and if there was any hint that a movie might be involved, participation in a class skyrocketed. Since there were few places large enough to house more than about 40 inmates, the chapel became one such focal point and for a while there were movies shown there recreationally twice a week. But then the chaplain decided to put a stop to this as a recreational activity, which required some inmate restructuring.

One of the inmates immediately created a syllabus for a “Film Criticism” class, and one of the movie nights was resurrected. Course content became an issue and some inmates made the mistake of complaining to the teacher that the movies being shown were all old and were duplicating those on the institutional TV movie network. She wearied of this and decided to nip it in the bud. She had a background in marine biology and for the next three months the Film Criticism class viewed old Jacques Cousteau TV reruns from the 1970s, mostly of fish eating fish. I think it must have been a set of CDs she picked up in a Salvation Army store.

When asked about this, she commented, “I decided to pick something that I knew no one had ever seen.”

She forgot to take into consideration that, while the 1970s sounded absolutely ancient to her, some of us were old enough to have seen these shows when they were originally aired on TV. But we weren’t going to say anything because we figured that, if
pressed, she could probably dig up something from before the invention of talkies. Jacques Cousteau may have been hopelessly archaic, but silent films of fish eating fish sounded even less appealing. Moby Dick in mime.

At one point the teacher approached me about teaching an ACE class in the evening. She knew that I was a clinical psychologist in the world of reality and seized on the opportunity to expand the ACE curriculum into the social sciences.

“Do you want to teach a psychology class?”

I thought about it for a millisecond before responding.

“That’s the last thing you want me to do.”

“Why?” She looked genuinely perplexed, probably much like I did whenever contemplating the camp’s administrative practices.

“Well, I wear green, so I’m not interested in running around the compound playing psychologist with the other inmates. Aside from being a violation of the ‘dual relationship’ part of my professional ethics, trust me, it would not be well received. And far and away the best examples of pathology I see around me to use in a classroom would be the COs. Do you really want me teaching inmates how to diagnose the likes of Mr. Dyspepsia and the Dread Huffert?”

There was a long, long pause.
“Now that you mention it . . .”

But I didn’t want to appear uninvested or unsupportive so I said, “How about I teach a class on behaviorism with a particular focus on why group punishment (the preferred strategy at the camp) is the worst approach to use in an institutional setting?”

“Well . . . (the wheels were turning) . . . why don’t you write up the curriculum and I’ll see how it looks.”

I nodded. It seemed a reasonable way out of the conversation, although we both knew that it wasn’t a serious suggestion in the first place.

So from that point on I stuck to the GED by mutual agreement. For the balance of my time I either taught, or at least showed up to show moral support to the other tutors. As I said, it was actually a rewarding experience, as a lot of guys were motivated and took advantage of the opportunity. Of course, there were a few impenetrable barriers. This was, after all, the BOP, where “Backwards on Purpose” had long since been replaced in my mind by “Brain Death on Parade.”

To begin with, the warden was allergic to computers, so we were technologically a bit hamstrung, like operating in a 30-year time warp. We also had limited space, which meant that classes were always being bumped around or cancelled when there was nowhere to meet. Much of the time it was like the old one-
room schoolhouse, where you had guys who were functionally illiterate mixed in with guys who had taken some college and were waiting for the documentation to catch up to the BOP. Then there were those who primarily spoke Spanish, Chinese, or Vietnamese. I think the guys who spoke only Arabic were afraid to talk and remained mute. After all, we were pretty close to the ADX where some of the 911 guys were likely housed. And there were many, many days when the teacher was gone and no one showed up to pinch hit. On those occasions most of the students typically looked left upon entering the classroom, saw that no teacher was in the office and immediately executed an about face. It had its challenges, but we prevailed.

We spent most of our time teaching math or language. The math ran through basic geometry and was more difficult than many would expect. That included the Camp Administrator. He loved to drop by in the morning and chat it up with the teacher, which meant that she must have had a better ear for his peculiar polylingual communication style than I.

One day I overheard her comment to him, “I bet you couldn’t pass the math part of the GED.”

He took exception to this, “Youagawannabedda?”

Based on his response, I was more concerned about his ability to pass the language part.
But the one that seemed to be the most challenging for our students was the essay. Passing the GED requires that the person be able to write an on-topic five-paragraph essay. I think there’s a good chance that this task would be beyond many of our current politicians.

One day I was working with several guys on their essays. They had been given an assigned topic and I had been asked to review their essays for content and structure. The topic was, “The happiest day of my life was . . .” and the guys had shown a lot of variety in their responses. My favorite was the one that started, “The happiest day of my life was the day I got my gun.” After reading his essay, I gave him high marks on the grammar part. Then, after thinking about it, I went back and gave him a really high grade overall, made sure I wrote it with my off hand, and put it under his pillow in his cube.

As time went on my job morphed into a combination of teaching and coordinating the documentation in the students’ files. This latter task required an attention to detail, coupled with the understanding that it was a largely meaningless activity. It was made particularly challenging by the fact that, while the students could be held captive during the lectures, many simply refused to do the self-study modules that were intrinsic to the program. This meant that most of the time
there was nothing to enter into the carefully designed tracking system.

One day the teacher called me into her office.

“We have an audit coming up in a couple of weeks.”

She pulled out some of the files.

“We have to mark half of this stuff as having been done. Let’s start looking at it tomorrow.”

I spent a sleepless night mulling this situation over carefully. As had been the case with my job orientation session, once again I felt like I was being asked to do something similar to what had caused the feds to systematically attempt to destroy me. The government’s central accusation against me had been that I had tried to avoid paying taxes by intentionally falsifying payroll tax documents, something I had vigorously denied and (unsuccessfully) contested. I found that the idea of setting myself up to be accused of this again gave me hives.

I was in the teacher’s office at first light the next morning.

“May I speak with you?”

“Sure.”

“Do you know why I’m here, that is, in prison?”

“No.”
“I was accused of conspiring to avoid paying payroll taxes by falsifying payroll tax documents. I feel like I’m being asked to do it again -- falsify documents, that is.”

“I certainly don’t want that.”

I believed her, but I had also learned the hard way how things can look to a sufficiently paranoid observer, particularly one that is career-hungry. As my wife is now fond of saying when discussing the feds’ general approach to things, “It’s OK, until it isn’t.” And when they decide it isn’t, watch out.

You see, one thing I’ve learned is that many people in prison, particularly those whose alleged crimes emanated from the murky swamp that is the world of business, had done something that was OK until it wasn’t. Often it wasn’t the act that changed, but the desire of some federal official to enhance a career by redefining it, thereby making it illegal. Since we have long since eliminated the need for prosecutors to establish intent in criminal trials, the target is often a moving one. The last thing I wanted to do was to go to prison while in prison.

But the audit was coming up and something needed to be in those files that showed we were actually doing something, which we were. About 2 am I had hit upon a solution that I thought would work, one that allowed us to put documentation in the
files that accurately reflected our activities and that would get us through the audit. I outlined my plan to her, she agreed, and the crisis was happily resolved.

Despite these occasional challenges, I stayed in the education department for the balance of my incarceration. The students came and went, as did the tutors. Some guys graduated, some guys tried hard and ran out of time, some guys created some great artwork on their binders. In that respect it was not so different than any other educational setting. Occasionally a CO would refuse to unlock a classroom so that a class could be held, and everyone would get a day off. And sometimes we would all get locked down and we would free read. For the most part, the teacher treated the tutors like human beings, apparently having missed portions of the regular CO training. Of course, she still went to the shooting range occasionally, so we tried to always present a moving target in front of the class in case she was having a bad day.

All in all, as prison jobs went it was a pretty good gig. But I should warn you. If you ever get incarcerated and decide to work in education, just don’t get very emotionally attached to a creeping charlie.
Humans are curious creatures. It is our curiosity that most likely dragged us out of the trees, that and the need to run over to the carrion before the other scavengers got there. As soon as we managed to get our basic needs under control, we started looking for a way to kill some time. Since nature had graced us with this rather large lump of protoplasm sitting on top of our necks, and since it seemed to be generating some odd things like thoughts and idiosyncratic obsessions, we started paying attention to it. Gradually our curiosity got the better of us and we decided to develop culture. Language was a big piece of that, which gave us a way to really start puzzling things out between ourselves, if not simply confusing ourselves altogether. When one paid any sort of attention at all, the mysteries were both plentiful and increasingly baffling.
Eventually this led to the development of our most arcane creation – the stock market, which to this day no one understands. A close second would be presidential politics.

But it is our curiosity that got us here, and it is our curiosity that keeps getting us into trouble. We know this on the deeper levels, hence the myth of Pandora and our low-grade ridiculing of cats. But that doesn’t stop us. Almost the first word that a child utters, not long after the inarticulate distortions that parents label “Mama” and “Dada,” and the one that is always followed by “Don’t say that!” is “Why?” “Why shouldn’t I touch the hot stove?” “Why shouldn’t I pull your beard or hit you with the glass bottle?” “Why shouldn’t I bite my sister?” That never stops; it just changes form with each new developmental phase. Even as adults, death doesn’t really occur with the cessation of breathing, it is an insidious process that begins when we stop asking “Why?”

So it is a sad realization when one discovers that asking “Why?” in the justice system is a quick route to becoming a gibbering idiot.

The destruction of “why” starts in the earliest stages, right after you realize that you have been targeted for institutionalized destruction by what you still tended to think of as “your” country. Even if you fully accept (a big “if”) that you were engaged in practices that were questionable or at
least frowned upon, if not frankly illegal, it is still startling to experience the full wrath of the justice system. No matter what your level of culpability, or lack thereof, somehow the consequences seem well out of proportion to the actions that gave rise to them. That starts the disconnect, and the level of bewilderment just grows.

As things moved along in my case I found myself caught up in an endless stream of “why” questions, and could never get a satisfactory answer to any of them. Why did the IRS Special Agent feel it necessary to lie to the Grand Jury? Why did both he and the prosecutors tell lies to the jury during my trial? Why was so much evidence excluded? Why did the IRS destroy their collection file, the one that contained potentially exonerating evidence? Why did they rely so heavily on the testimony of a guy who everyone knew was a chronic liar, had perjured himself, and was of questionable cognitive competence? Why was a juror allowed to sleep through most of my trial? And why didn’t the judge do anything about any of the above? Why? Why? Why? The answer was clear. Don’t bite your sister.

Eventually I got it, and it is really rather easy once you catch on. There is no “why.” None whatsoever. There is simply a system that exists, wishes to continue to exist, and which will go to just about any ends to protect its existence. It is really not much removed from those early guys before they jumped
down out of the trees; it has just become much more symbolic and abstract. Worrying about the “why” of it all is simply a waste of energy. No one else is.

So, you navigate the judicial system, never spending any time discussing the “whys.” You have left the universe of meaningful sight and sound and have entered the modern Twilight Zone, our culture’s World Without Why.

It’s good to get this orientation out of the way before you are incarcerated. It works a bit like stress-inoculation therapy. Because once you enter even the least secure and mildest level of the prison system, the federal camp, you are in an environment that makes the court system look almost rational – not quite - but almost. Nothing in my long, rather eventful life had prepared me for the steady diet of lunacy that comprises daily existence in a prison camp.

As you begin to integrate yourself into the prison population, most inmates feel almost overwhelmed by the pressure to “tell their stories.” Usually this is done to other new guys who are experiencing a similar type of internal pressure. That’s a good thing, because the guys who have been down for a while are well past that and, although they may be polite about it, typically don’t really want to listen to what they perceive to be newbie obsessing. And almost to a person, they will
quickly reorient someone who makes the mistake of starting a sentence with the word “why.”

“There is no why,” is the most frequent response, or if one is feeling particularly eloquent, the answer is “because they can.” It takes a while to realize that not only is this the only real answer to such a “why” question in the justice system, it is the best and most accurate answer. They do not do things because they work (they don’t), or out of a concern for justice (there is no such concern), or because it will help you in any way (most of the time it won’t), or, most importantly, because it might help reduce recidivism (it doesn’t) – they do it because they can.

You can choose to pursue the why of it all to your heart’s content in prison, if that’s what’s important for you to do as you kill your time. The most that will happen is you will receive increasingly tolerant chiding, and some snickers, from your compadres.

But for sheer entertainment value, nothing matches asking a “why” question of a CO. If you are lucky, what you will get is that blank look that seems to be carefully practiced by all bureaucratic types everywhere who find themselves overmatched by the requirements of a particular situation. It’s almost like they fall a few feet back inside themselves, with there being several layers of cotton between their brains and their eyes.
The result is the deadened and vacuous institutional gaze that no one would ever confuse with a preparation for a response. If one is unlucky, a "why" question kicks off an immediate fear response in a CO, one that is probably driven by the distinct possibility that he or she has no real understanding of the situation that occasioned the question and, therefore, no idea of what to do about it. Of course, fear being an uncomfortable emotion to feel, this is immediately converted to hostility or outright anger, with there being only one possible target – you. So there is a risk factor involved in asking COs "why" questions. Yet another reason to avoid doing so whenever possible.

Let’s say, for example, that you are confused by why it is that COs get to smoke with impunity on federal property. Now, understand, this is an issue that is the target of endless games between the inmates and the administration. Trying to control the uncontrollable seems to be something that is part of the basic orientation in CO training, and they are willing to resort to very strange behaviors as a result. Of course, this is only when they work in a camp setting. If they decide to get into a pissing contest with people about it behind the fence, where the inmates typically have much less to lose, they are likely to find themselves retired prematurely, perhaps on disability. But in camps they can do just about anything, because the one shared
agenda of all camp inmates is a desire to keep the COs out of their faces long enough so that the inmate can get the nonsense over with and go home.

So it is in the camps where the COs decided to promote their anti-smoking campaign. On the inmates’ side, it is hard to listen to accompanying sanctimonious blather about smoking when the COs wander around the compound openly doing so. Most inmates just chalk this up to yet another example of the general ineptitude of the administrators, but occasionally one will decide to see if the BOP will actually follow its written policies on the topic, not to mention federal statutes. Obviously, those inmates simply haven’t been paying as close attention. Such a temporary lapse of judgment led one of the inmates who was attending a substance abuse class to approach the instructor while on a class break. This instructor was lounging against a wall enjoying a hard-earned cigarette just outside the chapel where the class was being held. The inmate commented:

“You’re not supposed to be smoking here.”

There was a length pause, followed by a deep drag and exhale.

“I’m not the one who’s in fucking prison,” was the reply.

Point noted. It explained aspects of the course curriculum, especially where they covered the importance of
role-modeling. It also clarified why, with all the concern about smoking and focus on drug use and abuse, they didn’t offer any classes to help inmates break their dependency upon nicotine. Who was going to teach it?

Another inmate decided to approach the matter with Mr. Dyspepsia, whose chain-smoking was typically only interrupted when he would lose his balance and drop the cigarette as he was attempting to sleep while standing. Again, the inmate used the “why” question.

“Why can you smoke on the compound?

It is said that even the crickets stopped chirping. Mr. Dyspepsia paused, and paused, and paused some more. He finished his cigarette. He lit another. He wasn’t thinking how to respond. He was practicing his lowland gorilla look, the one he used to fend off inmate impertinences.

Eventually the inmate retreated, probably to calm his nerves by taking a smoke break as far from Mr. Dyspepsia as possible.

Such glaring inconsistencies were the warp and woof of life in the camp. As inmates, we were used to double standards, changing rules, and incomprehensible disciplinary practices. It seemed that right after following the White Rabbit out of Wonderland the administration and COs had stopped off at a convention where the keynote speaker talked about “The Ins and
Outs of Ineffective Discipline.” It became increasingly obvious to me that the main reason the setting didn’t degenerate into complete insanity and borderline chaos was because most of the inmates had both the motivation and just enough maturity to keep it from doing so. It certainly wasn’t due to the perceptive interventions of the COs, who seemed hell-bent on self-destruction much of the time.

For some reason the anti-smoking campaign brought out the worst on all sides, perhaps because they were attempting to deal with one of the most addictive practices known, utilizing group discipline intervention strategies, while refusing to even acknowledge it as an addiction. The COs certainly had some personal insight into the addictive part, as they continued to openly smoke throughout the campaign, even while rendering their disciplinary interventions.

Eventually a tenuous cease-fire developed. As long as the inmates only smoked in the “smoking” bathrooms, or while “hidden” behind the scoreboard on the baseball field, most of the COs ignored it. Of course, occasionally they would toss the residences and find some tobacco which, if in sufficient quantity, could get someone thrown in the hole for a while. But for the most part nobody flaunted the issue and no one cared. Then the situation deteriorated profoundly and rapidly.
Although it was to take a while for the true nature of the conflict to blossom, it all started when the Unit Manager was replaced by a lady who came to be known, with an absence of affection, as Prison Barbi. While this nickname was certainly not a measure of respect, neither was it an indication of simple sexism on the part of the inmates. It was more an acknowledgment that she seemed to be purposely adopting a persona that combined the bizarre panache of Sarah Palin with the utter vacuity of Paris Hilton. When she first addressed the inmates she made it clear that she intended to make some real changes, even going so far as to say that they were going to be actually following the policies in the *Up-To-Date/Out-Of-Date Handbook*, particularly the one about furloughs. She encouraged the inmates to apply for these much-prized commodities, which the inmates were told were granted rather routinely in most, if not all, other camps. Just not Florence. But as it turned out, Prison Barbi was a bit ahead of her skis and didn’t have the backing of the Warden, the only vote that really mattered in the prison complex. As a result she spent the next several months having to come up with increasingly creative reasons for denying the barrage of furlough applications that she received. My favorite was when she denied a guy a furlough because “furloughs were to look for work,” and his 8-hour furlough request wasn’t going to give him sufficient time to fly 3 hours each way to San
Diego in order to look there for a job, as that was where he was discharging. Of course what he had requested was a furlough to be with his family members who were flying out to see him. The actual BOP policy statement about furloughs (as reflected in Up-To-Date/Out-Of-Date Handbook) allowed these, entitling them “Social Furloughs.” They were supposed to be a way for inmates to begin reintegration into their families (an oft-stated BOP goal) and to titrate themselves back into polite society without eating the local residents.

After getting whipped back into shape on this issue by the Warden, Prison Barbi turned her attention to her real area of interest, the beautification/desertification of the units and grounds. Here her taste ran to the Spartan and antiseptic. Suddenly there was a great deal of attention being paid to the accumulation of invisible dirt in the corners of the stairs, the hosing of spider webs down from awning overhangs (a task that had to be done daily in our area in order to be effective), and the scraping of bird feces off the cement sidewalks. We all agreed that if we had to choose between her spending her time on these matters and helping inmates get appropriate amounts of transitional halfway house time as dictated under the Second Chance Act, or developing appropriate rehabilitation and education programs to promote successful societal reintegration and a reduction of recidivism, bird poop got our votes.
As she settled into her role, she even got excited about a residence hall competition for Christmas decorations. This contest was established, with the prize being first call to Christmas dinner. Having a limited range of available activities, the inmates kind of got into this, that is until someone acquired some stencils and had the temerity to make Christmas signs with them. Stencils were clearly a contraband item, even though he had gotten them at his work site. After the stencil source was sweated, there was the typical and predictable punitive response, with a resulting disqualification for the offending unit. Merry Christmas everyone.

Stencils aside, some of us had noticed what seemed to be a measure of ambivalence on the part of the COs about the whole Christmas decoration thing. This revealed itself most clearly through the treatment of snowmen. There was one thing that was worse than being an inmate at the Florence Camp. You didn’t want to be a snowman.

This first became evident when some of the inmates were so bold as to build a snowman in the area out in front of one of the units. It was a very fine snowman, indeed, with a scarf sacrificed to put a finishing touch on the accessories. As luck would have it, on that day there were two particularly noxious COs working, the Dread Huffert and Mr. Dyspepsia. Upon spying this snowman they flew into a security frenzy, kind of like
watching a very small group of hammerhead sharks descending upon a school of minnows. Grabbing a couple of baseball bats, they made short work of that snowman, leaving the battered carcass in clear view of all inmates who might feel any similar inclination to express holiday cheer. It was kind of chilling to watch, actually, sort of like what happens when you see nature videos of a cheetah taking down a wounded antelope. Only partially satisfied with this outburst of mindless violence, the attackers skulked off in search of other prey, perhaps a baby harp seal. I called that episode Snowman I.

Snowman II occurred about a year later. By then the Dread Huffert had either retired, been forced to quit, or had succumbed to the inevitable corrosive effects of his internal unbridled bile. But Mr. Dyspepsia, when his hangover allowed him to maintain verticality, was still going strong.

A new set of inmates had built another snowman, this one out on the track. Mr. Dyspepsia saw it the next morning when he came to work. His reaction can only be described as psychologically disturbing.

He jumped in his truck and whipped around the road behind the living units to the track. There, he blasted across the track itself to the interior, where the defenseless snowman stood. Now this snowman was probably already feeling vulnerable, given that it was about 50 degrees out and he was in
the process of rapidly melting. But Mr. Dyspepsia cared little for vulnerability and was having nothing of natural solutions. Lining up his truck he gunned the engine and took out the snowman, then, to be sure there was no chance of a spontaneous recovery, he ran over the pieces. Since this had clearly driven up both his adrenaline and testosterone levels, he immediately charged over to a couple of the Native guys who were standing by the sweat lodge observing his actions, and gave them a thorough shakedown. The Natives have seen some pretty strange behavior from the White Man over the years, so I suspect that this rolled off them. The rest of us didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, or hide. But the message was clear. In the Florence Prison Camp, it was a case of Frosty Beware.

As for Prison Barbi and the abortive Christmas Cheer campaign, for all her ability to focus 100% of her energy on the wrong issues, she had one saving grace. She had the attention span of an intoxicated gnat. If she suddenly decided that the hooks for hanging clothes in the cubes had to be removed because they produce unsightly neatly hanging clothes, or that it was important to endorse the pre-slicing, then later confiscation of the one piece of fruit that the Up-To-Date/Out-Of-Date Handbook said inmates were allowed to take out of the chow hall, all you had to do was wait. She would forget. Couple that with the fact that any real oversight took consistent energy on the part
of the COs, most of whom were simply trying to do their time until they could collect their pensions, and such edicts fell mostly in the inane and transient nuisance category. But smoking (where this all started) was a different story.

There had to be a personal background issue at work. Prison Barbi must have decided at some point in her life that she was going to stamp out this pernicious evil because it became her cause célèbre. She decided to take on the smokers, throwing the full weight of BOP lunacy into the project.

It was summer and she started with the guys behind the outside scoreboard. Suddenly, it was revealed that the outside security cameras had caught a number of inmates smoking behind the scoreboard. This was about as clandestine an activity as the fact that stamps were used for currency. To this point, everyone, COs and inmates alike, had seen it as an acceptable compromise, particularly since doing so kept the administration from having to try to get Mr. Dyspepsia’s behavior back in the box. Not Prison Barbi. The ax fell. Disciplinary “shots” were written. Predictably, since it was now no longer safe to smoke outside, the smokers were driven back inside the residences, and even larger clouds of smoke episodically wafted out of the so-designated restrooms.

The next months were marked by a pitched battle between the smokers and Barbi’s Marching Minions. There were skirmishes
aplenty, with the occasional casualty of war being dragged off to the POW camp in the hole. For the most part, it was fairly amusing, kind of like watching a tennis match between David and Goliath. The inmates were David, quick resourceful, determined, and mildly anti-social. The Marching Minions were Goliath, ponderous, all-powerful, and as mindlessly self-righteous as can be. The COs had the power, whereas all the inmates had going for them was the entirety of recorded human history detailing the failure of such campaigns. In a twist to the idiom, it was a case of a somewhat resistible force meeting a slightly moveable object. One thing was clear; no one was winning.

Despite all their power, the COs had one other thing that was a major impediment to their success — themselves. They simply couldn’t seem to get out of their own way. They insisted on utilizing a group discipline model for this, and all other, inmate transgressions, apparently functioning under the complete misconception that inmates in the camp were going to police each other. One of the first things you learned upon entry to the camp is that all inmates wear green. No one’s green is any greener than anyone else’s. Shot-callers, those inmates who spoke for groups, were left behind the fence. In the camp, efforts to instruct other inmates on what they should or shouldn’t do were considered poor form, to the point of risking complete social ostracism. One would think that the BOP
administrative staff understood this, particularly since one of their own written policies expressly forbade them from putting any inmate in a position of authority over any other inmate, for any reason. Someone got it somewhere. Just not these guys.

So they settled into group discipline as their preferred model. In particular, they loved to take away the TVs. No matter how unrelated the infraction, or how few inmates were involved, taking away the TVs was the unilateral response. To some inmates, this was kind of a big deal and each time they did it, the tension level in the camp ratcheted up a notch. In a remarkable display of psychological obtuseness, any resulting issues from even one less stable inmate simply kept the TVs off-line that much longer. I decided that the camp psychologist wasn’t just absent from their management meetings, but that he had died.

After one week of such an episode, where one of the residences had been TV-less based on some sort of smoking transgression, perhaps an inmate refusing to share his lighter with a CO, Prison Barbi approached Fred. By then he had been designated by her as Head Orderly, a title that both violated the above-referenced policy statement and created for Fred a sentence laden with angst.
“So,” said Prison Barbi, on one of the occasions where she was holding him captive in her office before launching him out against the bird poop, “are people over there upset?”

She was clearly hoping that the answer was “yes.”

“Some are,” he responded carefully.

“Well,” she said, radiating a certain smugness about how well her anti-smoking intervention was apparently working, “What are you going to do about it?”

He paused for quite a bit before responding.

“Not a thing.”

He had read the BOP policy, even if she hadn’t.

Her smugness faded a bit, to be replaced with mild irritation.

“So, give me the name of a smoker.”

This is favorite tactic of federal prosecutors these days, one that they used to incarcerate numerous people at our camp, by relying strictly on the comments and accusations of other people who were under investigation. It’s how they build these huge conspiracy cases for their press reports. Of course, it helps if you can believably threaten each person you question with 10, 15, or 20 years in prison so that you can get them to deal. Facing that kind of pressure, most will eventually cough up a name, even if they haven’t even met the person being named. Such niceties like truth or fact don’t seem to matter much these
days in federal investigations. It helps give them an endless supply of labor for the prisons.

But in camp, giving such information is considered ratting and, while not uncommon, is socially frowned upon. And since the inmate being pressured is already imprisoned, there is less incentive to “deal.” Barbi still took a swing at it.

“Give me the name of a smoker . . .”

The implied “or else” was unclear.

His pause was longer this time. While there was no clear threat, she was the Unit Manager, she was kind of crazy, and the BOP has been known to “diesel” inmates they don’t like for months around the country, keeping them ahead of their families who were trying to find them.

Finally, the inmate said, “I’ll give you a name.”

Barbi’s affect brightened perceptibly and she was poised to write.

“Mr. Dyspepsia.”

“Go back to work.”

The TVs came and went with great frequency. If an inmate did something that annoyed a CO, particularly if it could be at all tied to smoking, off they went. In the end what we each learned was that someone else’s behavior could result in negative consequences for us. Most of us already knew that. In fact, for many inmates it was a large part of why they were
incarcerated in the first place. But prison is supposed to be a time for reflection and we were supposed to take our newfound knowledge with us when we left. So we all vowed that, upon release, when we saw someone smoking on the street we were going to walk right up and slap the cigarette out of his mouth, particularly if it was Mr. Dyspepsia.

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After being confronted with the continuing insanity of camp existence for a while and realizing that “why” questions were only causing me mental pain, I found that I was still having trouble disengaging. It appeared that stronger measures were in order. I was walking by a bulletin board in the main foyer of the residence and saw a sign for an upcoming AA/NA meeting, one that was to be held in one of the classrooms after hours, that is until Mr. Dyspepsia started locking those classrooms to make sure that such nefarious activities were nipped in the bud. I found that an idea was percolating in the back of my brain. Then it flew forth, almost crushing the soggy mass that was the remnant of my frontal lobe – why not create a Florence chapter of WA – “Why Anonymous?”

I knew this wasn’t realistic and that any such group would be immediately disbanded by the administration, or its participants would simply be encouraged to pretend to be snowmen
in front of the residence units. But my grip on reality was becoming tenuous, at best. The combination of sheer boredom, endless inanity, and pernicious low-level threat had slowly eroded that fine line between contemplation and action. I was losing the ability to distinguish the wish from the act, the thought from the doing, i.e. I was no longer certain whether I was engaged in idle and slothful inactivity or focused and productive motion. In short, I was at risk of becoming that which I feared the most, a typical BOP employee. Nevertheless, I decided to set up a chapter of WA. I think. Maybe I didn’t and I just imagined it. It was all slipping away.

Surely, I thought, I wasn’t the only person who continued to struggle with this issue. I saw myself setting up a flier and posting it beneath the AA/NA sign. After a week or so there would have been some names on it and we could have set about looking for a location where we could break BOP policy by having inmates gather for something other than a religious service. We would have had to wait until Mr. Dyspepsia was attending his own recovery group before tucking ourselves into a corner of an empty classroom.

Since in my fantasy I had been the impetus for this whole thing, I took the lead. It played out like a video in my head.

“Hi, I’m Bill and I’m a whyaholic.”
“Hi, Bill,” was the chorus. Someone had been there before, or had just been well trained by movies.

“I’ve been here almost a year and I can’t stop thinking about ‘why’ things. I’m sick of it and want to just do my time.”

A voice popped up from the back of the group. “You need to turn yourself over to a higher power, admitting that you are powerless before it.”

I thought I had done that when I reported to camp.

“Then you need to identify all the people you have injured over the course of your life with your ‘why’ behaviors and apologize to them.”

Given that this was most likely my own mental chatter, these guys were hitting a little close to home. I had been a philosophy major in college so that was likely to be a really, really long list. It was also becoming clear to me that just about all the other characters in this dialog had “been there before” and that the wrong person was running the fantasy. I bowed to those phantoms with superior knowledge and stepped aside, starting to internally compose a list of those against whom I had transgressed, although I kept asking myself why I was doing it.

Another spectral soul moved smoothly into the coordinator role and I was able to slowly disengage, taking the combined
role of homunculus/observer. One by one the “whyaholics” introduced themselves and admitted their powerlessness before this addiction to curiosity. It seemed that I had tapped into a need.

We met quasi-religiously for the better part of a year (which meant that I continued to revisit this fantasy on a regular basis), several times barely escaping being discovered by the COs. We started to feel like a particularly clandestine and threatened sect and wondered if we could end up being excommunicated from camp life if apprehended. Either that or fed to the Dread Huffert. But we persisted. But then I found myself wondering how something could persist that never really objectively existed. Then I started wondering if I was truly completely losing it. Nor could I remember why I had ever started this particular exercise. The fact that I was curious about it at all didn’t bode well.

I never did get to the end of my list of the why-harmed, but just making myself aware of the issue seemed to do a Zen thing and help me shove it all into the background, kind of like how I have learned to handle my persistent tinnitus. Over time I found that not only was I able to police my own “whying” tendencies, but whenever a newbie popped out a “why” I could give the sage response — “Because they can.”
Eventually I said my goodbyes and left the group, which meant I encouraged whatever I had unearthed to crawl back into the darker recesses of my mind. For all I know the group is still running back there. It may be the only true legacy of my camp experience, and it could help explain why I seem to talk to myself more these days.

After trying to repress all my “why” questions for a couple of years I was getting close to the door, that euphemism that described my upcoming release. I found my old patterns of behavior striving to reassert themselves, and experienced something of a psychological rebound effect. I found myself suddenly swirling in a kaleidoscopic sea of whys. This forced me to triage. I was able to boil them down to the seven best and most perplexing, and made an effort to explain the answers in terms of the thinking of camp administrators. It’s good that I waited to do this for a few years, since I found that the exercise required a depth of understanding of the underlying psychosis in BOP thinking that would have simply eluded me earlier in my camping experience. What surprised me was how difficult it turned out to be to try to live inside their heads, even briefly. I found the echoes to be particularly unsettling.

I was reminded of the movie “Being John Malkovich,” a rather bizarre fantasy about this guy who figures out how to
occupy the actor John Malkovich’s brain, and starts marketing the experience. I admit that I entertained doing something similar with the Florence Camp Administrator, but found that no one would cough up the three stamps that I was charging. Thinking about doing it with Prison Barbi was, well, just too disturbing to think about at all. So, I was on my own.

Having triaged my resurgent whys into the “Seven Wonders of the Why,” I set about to provide explanations.

#1. Why wouldn’t they let inmates work with computers, even computers detached from the internet?

When not focused on anger and retribution, the BOP tells Congress and the public that it is engaged in a rehabilitative exercise with inmates. Of course, their sky-high recidivism rates suggest that they are not very good at this. Still, they love to point out all the programming and educational opportunities that they provide, in fact, insist upon. But a closer examination of these opportunities tells a different story. You realize that inmates are being trained for two occupations, industrial food service and janitorial work. And under no circumstances are they to be allowed to learn basic computer skills, like word processing, spread sheets, graphics, or anything else that is required in just about every current American job assignment.
This puzzled me for quite a while, but I finally figured out their concern. You see, they were fearful that someone would take a silicon chip out of a computer, use toothpaste glue to attach a speaker wire from their cannibalized earphones, add the receptive device from their radio (powering it with a battery combination usually used to light cigarettes), utilize inmate alchemy to produce a radio transmitter and use that to take control of a weather satellite. They would then dump snow on the administrator’s houses until they cried “Uncle!” and let us go home. Once I put all that together, the concern was obvious, and I realized computer training would remain forever elusive.

#2 Why did they card us leaving our living units on the way to meals?

This was a real stumper. They would stand by the locked door, attempting to titrate 350 inmates out one at a time, making each one flash his card as he went. Of course, they didn’t bother to match the picture to the person or they would have taken so much time that they would have missed lunch themselves, or gotten there so late that maybe someone would have finally fixed the “Code 67” error on the tracking machine so that lunch was no longer free. This whole exercise seemed
particularly mindless until we kept hearing about the budget crunch. Then I had it.

The BOP sells empty beds on hotels.com. That means on any given day tourists might be filling out empty cube beds in the prison residence halls, masquerading as inmates. But the advertised price didn’t include meals, and they weren’t issuing ID cards. So the COs carded everyone to make sure the paying customers weren’t sneaking into the chow hall to savor the fine cuisine at the Café Florence. I bet the kitchen cops weren’t happy when they started this one, as the tourists would probably have been better tippers than we were.

#3 Why didn’t they buy enough chairs for inmates to sit in on the compound, especially for places like the recreation room or TV rooms, where sitting seemed to have been encouraged?

Again, something of a stumper. This caused an almost endless stream of problems for the administrators, yet it was an area where they seemed particularly brain dead in the solutions department. But I realized that I just wasn’t looking at it in the correct way.

It was important for inmates to remain standing, for several reasons. First and foremost, prison camp is not supposed to be confused with summer camp, something that was pointed out to us by the Camp Administrator shortly after our
arrival. I got that. I really did. When I looked at the sign in front, it said “Federal Prison Camp,” not “Cindy’s Spa and Garden of Earthly Delights.” And it was really kind of a lousy place to be. Not having places to sit so that we best approximated a flock of flamingos was an important part of the whole learning penitence and remorse thing, guilt or innocence notwithstanding. In addition to being incarcerated we were supposed to suffer in order for the COs and other administrators to feel like they were discharging their public responsibility. Now, I know the Supreme Court ruled that incarceration itself was the punishment and that, except for misbehavior, there was not supposed to be punishment piled on top of punishment. But that was looking at the system as if it were designed for rehabilitation, something that we all know hasn’t been true for about 40 years. Anyway, one of the things you also realize early on is the Supreme Court rulings are often completely ignored in the legal system. That’s just how we do things in this country these days.

But the importance of punishment aside, it was almost equally important that inmates be stressed as much as possible. How else were they going to learn how to function in a world where resources, like chairs, are very limited? And how else could the COs know that the inmates had sufficiently inculcated the lessons from their prison experience? If an inmate could
effectively handle the stress from the kind of mindless rules that dominate camp life, then he was clearly ready to be set free. It was the BOP’s own version of stress-inoculation therapy. And it served the secondary purpose of allowing us practice in queuing up at the welfare office when our felony records kept us from finding meaningful employment.

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I realized that a lot of things were starting to become clear to me. All it required was that I turn my brain into a pretzel, throw in a lot of underlying hostility, with a dab of unbridled paranoia, and it all made perfect sense. The last time I remembered this kind of thinking making complete sense to me was when I was having an engaging conversation with a man who had been floridly psychotic for about 35 years and thought he was Master of the Universe.

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#4 Why couldn’t they seem to get the hot water working consistently in the residence units?

Ah, to find this puzzling you first had to assume that they wanted us to have consistent hot water. Then it would make sense to be confused about why the problem had existed for at least the last six years. But a closer examination revealed that perhaps this was not their agenda at all.
While hot water was always an issue, we went through about a seven-month episode where it was more nonexistent than existent. Ever the adaptive sort, the inmates compensated. Every morning started out with a similar exchange.

“Is there hot water today?”

“Kinda. If you turn on the two showers near the window to cold, the one by the hall is on and off.”

“What about the sinks.”

“Turning on a couple of them, too, would probably be good. Remember to step back when someone flushes a toilet.”

Thanks.”

“Oh, and watch out. There was hot water in the urinals early this morning and I almost burned my dick off.”

“Gotcha.”

Sometimes there was an alternate conversation, one that was truly environment-specific.

“Is there hot water today?”

“Not really.”

“Is Huffert on?”

“I think so.”

“Gotcha.”

Much of the time at least warm water was intermittently available, depending upon one’s ability to divine the appropriate shower/sink/spigot formula. Most of the time we
engaged in the kind of behavior one get when training pigeons in a Skinner box, a favorite tool of the old psychological behaviorists. Whatever the last thing that was tried before success got repeated and any new piece of behavior got added to the chain for the next time. It’s how they got chickens to play the piano. Eventually these chains became simply too complex and we took to sacrificing small animals in our cubes before approaching the shower room, so that we could read their entrails for guidance.

Of course, if the guys got the hot water running, no one wanted to shut it off. This meant that hot water would be left running 24/7 in all of the shower rooms, unless someone appointed himself as a water policeman, which no one was really keen on doing because you certainly didn’t want to be blamed when the hot water didn’t show up again for a week. This caused a bit of a stir in the administrative offices, as they reportedly got some heat about high water usage from the town of Florence. Of course in the middle of all this, the administrators added their own bizarre ingredient to the mix.

All our water came from a large power plant, which had huge boilers in operation. Inmates oversaw those boilers, making sure that they didn’t blow up or inject too great a concentration of noxious chemicals into the water supply. But in the power plant, as in many work settings, COs were at the
top of the chain, which was an ever-present but dangerous
arrangement. One day a CO took it upon himself to solve this
plumbing problem once and for all. He had decided that it was
all about the build-up of petrified sludge in the pipes, a
deduction based mainly on the obstructions that they kept
encountering whenever they would cut out a section. It may or
may not have been the major issue, but it was surely the one
upon which they were focused. So this guy instructed the
inmates to flush the system with pure, undiluted acid. This
went on for a while, with the slightly more chemically informed
inmates getting increasingly uncomfortable.

One of the inmates was a pre-doc physics student, before he
and his supervising professor were incarcerated for
inappropriately paying and utilizing some Chinese doctoral
students to work on a project, thus apparently violating some
aspect of immigration law that he was never clear about. He was
a quiet fellow, but looked up from his book on advanced
turbulence and laconically pointed out to the CO that pure acid
was eventually going to blow every connection in the system,
which would likely force a solution to the problem, but might
not be the most cost-effective way to approach it. Then he went
back to reading his book. This caused the CO to reflect further
and he stopped the acid-injection project. In fact, when others
above him found out what he had done they flushed the system
with thousands of gallons of water a day, continuously for almost a week. We inmates thought that perhaps that had helped get the city of Florence’s attention. We also thought perhaps they should have considered flushing the CO.

Anyway, the administrators decided that they had to stop this overuse of water by the inmates, so they installed flow reducers in the showers, as well as those faucets that only run for about 30 second before shutting themselves off. It made sense in a way. But then I walked by the bathroom and observed that a faucet had failed, and was now running merrily at full bore, with literally no way to turn it off. From that point on there was never a time I can remember when at least one of the faucets was not in failure mode, which meant that water ran 24/7. Someone commented, “Whoever produced those things must have gotten one helluva government contract.”

Then the hot water disappeared altogether. This, unfortunately, coincided with a sub-zero cold snap, as well as a flu epidemic that had us all locked down for ten days. It brought new meaning to the concept of a cold shower. We developed the fine art of the hokey-pokey shower - “you put your right arm in; you take your right arm out . . .” It was during that period that we also began to see clues as to the BOP’s real motivations.
The first hint occurred in a Town Hall meeting where we met the BOP employee who had been assigned the task of resolving this problem.

“Look,” he said, “I want you to know that I’m working on this problem 24/7. When I’m home my wife asks me what I’m thinking about and I tell her that I’m trying to figure out the hot water problem at the camp.”

He paused to wait for the appreciative applause to die down. When people got the guy with dementia to stop clapping, he continued.

“But you have to understand – I’m an electrician, not a plumber, and no one has ever really showed me how the system works.”

There was another pause. Even the demented guy knew better than to clap at that one.

“But I’m not going to quit until I get it.”

Uh-huh. This was a Friday at about 4. He was gone by 5, after assuring us that he “would be on it” first thing Monday morning.

The second clue was dropped in a later Town Hall meeting, this time led by the Camp Administrator. Now, this gentleman professed to be able to speak numerous languages. Unfortunately, it seemed that he spoke them simultaneously, which produced a rather unusual dialectical polyglot that was
largely incomprehensible to English-speakers and Non-English speakers alike. It also bore a strong resemblance to the cadence and intonation of Ricky Ricardo, for those of us old enough to remember “I Love Lucy” classics.

“Oh, Ricky?”

“Luuuuuucy . . . we godda prooblems . . .”

“Guys,” he said (I think), “I know you hadn’t hadda hota wadder fur a few dayas . . .”

At this point he was interrupted from multiple sources,

“Days? How about 7 months!”

“I know, I know,” he said, quieting the crowd with his ever-present hand gestures, “daysa turngo inta waeks . . .”

We looked at each other to make sure we were translating correctly. He was partly right. For us days, weeks, and months were largely indistinguishable. Every day was Groundhog Day. Still . . .

One of the guys who was a pretty accomplished mimic sidled up to me and whispered in my ear,

“Luuuuuuuuucy . . . . we godda beeg, beeg prooblems . . . .”

So, we kind of knew we were screwed on this issue, but for the longest time we actually thought they were trying to fix it and were simply incompetent, possibly because the wiring that they were addressing didn’t seem to control the plumbing. But,
as with all BOP “why” questions, getting a correct answer required a change of perspective. Their goal wasn’t to fix the hot water at all, which explains why it was still an issue a year and a half later when I was released.

Florence was first and foremost a work camp, where inmates were expected to keep the prison system afloat so that the COs could safely surf the internet and cover for each other when they played hooky in the afternoons. Thus, it was important that the inmates be robust and generally healthy, except for those who were legitimately handicapped, but who weren’t because “there were no handicapped people in the camp.” (I had finally figured out that what the Camp Administrator meant was that to be handicapped in Florence was to be invisible, so they just didn’t count.)

Hot water often goes with soap, a combination that just as often kills germs. That can end up undermining the body’s natural defenses against disease. It is far better to simply avoid things like soap and hot water so that an inmate’s resistance can be enhanced, hopefully resulting in less time lost from work. The BOP is prone to antiquated thinking and this was a return to the 1700s, where baths were to be avoided because it was presumed that they undermined health. The physicians from Louis XIII’s court would have been proud. In
fact, they probably would have recognized a good portion of the equipment and techniques utilized in the medical department.

There was also a Darwinian element to this thinking, as those who couldn’t adjust and who ended up getting fatally ill were simply shipped to non-work camps. Lord knows, these days there is an endless supply of federal prisoners headed out of the courts to replace them.

So, looked at properly, they were only trying to help us be as strong as possible, all part of the overarching “Be All That You Can Be” program. Realizing that, I felt a great deal of relief, and almost a warm glow toward my captors, until the next time I stepped into a freezing shower and felt my testicles smack into the top of my brain pan.

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I felt like I was kind of on a roll. At first I was pleased that I had been able to readjust my thinking so successfully and could so readily divine the logic driving previously incomprehensible administrative practices. Then I thought about what that meant. Forcing oneself to think like a paranoid idiot could have a definite long-term downside. An early European psychologist, Francis Galton, did this in a conscious attempt to see what it was like to be paranoid. Once he got himself into that frame of mind, he found it very difficult to shut it off. I didn’t want to suffer a similar
fate. But by then I was committed and just had to hope I would be able to find my way through this mental labyrinth and come out at least mainly intact on the other side.

#5 Why did they insist that everyone (including the 85-year-old guy with dementia) take GED classes?

Actually, that’s not entirely true. If you could verify that you had a GED, or if it indicated in your PSI that you had a high school diploma (whether or not you did), you were exempted from this requirement. But if you didn’t, or had lost the diploma and your high school had burned down, or if you had the lack of foresight to have gotten your doctorate from a foreign university, which the BOP seemed to frown upon, you were so required. Over the course of my time in the Education Department I taught a few guys with advanced college degrees, at least two guys who were so visually impaired that they couldn’t see what they were trying to write or anything that I was doing on the board (but who had been waiting many months for their glasses to emerge from medical), a number who had to have the guys next to them translate what I was saying, and some others who simply lacked the cognitive equipment to ever pass the curriculum.
Then there was the interest and motivation factor. Not everyone finds education a very compelling activity, and we supposedly live in a country that allows adults to pursue other interests. But in prison, failing to attend GED classes when so required could result in a variety of dire penalties, from loss of good time to a trip to the hole. That created some very interesting motivational dynamics.

I have to admit, this made only limited sense to me, especially when I would watch the demented guy continue to have difficulty finding the right room. But, again, it was a matter of simply changing my perspective. Obviously this was an issue that was very, very important to the BOP. Prison is all about education. That’s why they require their role-model COs to have GEDs. And if they had to go through the pain of getting their certificates, by God, inmates were going to suffer equally. It was a question of basic fairness. Besides, how were they going to expect inmates to accurately compute their bribes, or produce reliable betting sheets during March Madness? The whole system simply ran much more smoothly if everyone was on the same page.

#6 Why didn’t the BOP accept any donations from the outside world?

When I first arrived at the camp I was drawn to the library, since books have always been something of a cornerstone
in my life. I had this fantasy that the BOP would most assuredly want people to gain knowledge and better themselves, which would then potentially enhance their future contributions to society. I imagined at least a sizeable room dedicated to this kind of self-study and pursuit of excellence. I admit to some level of disappointment when I encountered the reality.

The library was a combination legal and leisure library that was housed in a relatively small area, as part of the education wing. There was an inmate working there who had spent a number of years trying to bring order to the chaos that he had inherited and who had produced a very workable system, one that promoted the flow of books around the compound with a minimum of resistance. Books would be carried to the living units by inmates, then after having been read were put on a shelf outside the door to the unit. If they remained there for a few days without being picked up to be read, they would be transferred to a shelf outside the door to the hub of several living units. A few more days there without being claimed and the books would be carried back for reshelving in the library.

This main library guy had also spent considerable time both organizing and becoming knowledgeable about the various legal reference materials, and he was technically considered to be a law clerk. I was particularly struck by the fact that the non-
legal books were almost exclusively novels, with only a smattering of nonfiction.

I asked about this and was told that this was because the library consisted almost solely of books that had been sent in to inmates, then put into the general pool for anyone to read. Of course, this was technically against a BOP policy that said inmates could share nothing with each other, including books or magazines. This caused the more cautious to carefully cut their names off their magazines before placing them on the sharing shelves. But even the COs knew that rule was nuts and only the literal-minded or horribly bored CO would consider enforcing it. The BOP’s own contribution to the library was two sets of encyclopedias, a *Books in Print*, a couple of atlases that were three or four wars behind, and a few other reference books. There was also an extensive religious library in the chapel, again a product of the inmates, not the BOP.

Being new at that point, and having come from environments where I functioned as an administrator much of the time, I had an unfortunate tendency to try to solve problems. As was the case with many others I had met in prison, it was indulging that aspect of my personality that had resulted in my incarceration in the first place. The BOP had yet to completely stifle that impulse, although later it would be so deeply buried that I
feared such skills would be forever lost to me. Perhaps that will help me to avoid future incarcerations.

I approached the lady in charge of the library.

“I have some connections on the outside and could probably help to beef up the library.”

She looked at me patiently, but with what seemed to be a marked lack of joie d’vive.

“The BOP doesn’t accept donations.”

That struck me as odd and I wandered off to mull. I’m a great muller.

I checked around a bit. It was then that I discovered that it wasn’t just the donation of educational material that was disallowed, it was any donations whatsoever.

I mulled some more. Sometimes I can be a slow learner and I could feel that I wasn’t through bloodying my nose on the books issue quite yet. I put the “no donations” policy together with the “no inmates sharing property” policy, along with the understanding that the latter was rarely, if ever, enforced, and I had a brainstorm. By then I had already started to function at such an occluded level that I experienced it as a wet pop.

I went back to the lady CO in charge.

“How about this? What if I find 100 inmates, each of whom has family that would be willing to send him one book a month for six months? Using the Books in Print we could produce a
list of desirable books and we’d have a crackerjack library in no time.”

I waited for the kudos to rain down on me for my display of ingenuity and creative problem-solving.

There was a long pause. There was a very, very long pause. I wondered if perhaps she was just stunned by the obvious brilliance of this solution. Slowly, I felt my enthusiasm drain away as I realized that she was not only completely uninspired by this idea, but was trying to come up with the easiest way to completely shut it down.

Eventually, she responded, “Why don’t you make the list and I’ll see if I can buy any of them.”

This was the perfect bureaucratic response. It gave the appearance of possibly taking the idea seriously, while communication through every other level a complete lack of interest. It was the kind of response that I had used as an administrator myself on occasion, telling someone that I was taking their idea under advisement until it went away. I left my shield on the field and retreated to my cube for further mulling.

The more I mulled the more I realized that this had nothing to do with the books, the library, or anything specific. It was merely an extension of the BOP’s active non-donation policy. I decided to just observe for a while and started to see verifying
signs all around me. Eventually I got it. The BOP didn’t accept donations because it didn’t have to. If it wanted something, that thing just appeared, kind of like magic. I imagined that somewhere there was this warehouse that had a rear wall that extended to infinity. In it was an endless stream of boxes that could be drawn from, sending virtually anything to the various requesting sources, kind of like the way the recycling center worked for the inmates. There was no need for donations. Hell, they routinely threw out more functional stuff than a small city could have used for general operations.

When that thought struck me, I had my real epiphany. It wasn’t so much that the BOP refused donations, or didn’t accept donations, or had any real security concerns about donations. It was a much more fundamental issue, one that reflected the underlying color of the organization. They simply didn’t know what donations were, either the fact or the concept.

It was kind of like trying to explain the idea of snow to someone who lived in Polynesia prior to the invention of the TV. It just didn’t compute. Why would someone give something to someone else once it had been used when it could simply be thrown away? A new one will show up. For the BOP, if there was extra of something it would never occur to them to give it to someone in need. What would be the purpose of that? If people weren’t being lazy they’d just get it themselves. Chuck it.
There’s always more. As with all the “why” questions that continued to devil me, it was obvious when looked at in the right way. Donate, schmonate. Consume. Destroy. Replace. It’s the BOP way.

#7 Why did they insist on running the place with such capricious rules and ineffective policies?

Answering this required me to suspend all rational thought and agree to take a trip to the Florence Heart of Darkness, the deep recesses of the Warden’s mind. I expected that this metaphorical journey would be long and perilous, and girded my spirit accordingly. If fact, it was a short trip and I was struck by how linear the route turned out to be. Just outside a small room with a bunch of empty cabinets was a corridor with a single door at the end, the outside of which was engraved with a familiar quote,

“Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here.”

Did I really want to know? I simply couldn’t resist. In quest of this final enlightenment, I opened the door. There, floating in a void of the deepest black were large block letters,

“BECAUSE WE CAN.”

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My whying behavior had followed a quadratic curve. First I had found myself besiegued by such thoughts, then (with the continued support of my apparently imaginary WA group) I had pushed such things out of my mind completely. Then, as I approached release, I had experienced a rebound, possibly a reflection of my preparation to reenter some variant of my prior life where “whys” had played a rich role. My brain had once been full of lush and growing things, only to have suffered through a BOP desertification process, but was now starting to throw up new shoots. I needed to leave before the BOP got wind of that and mowed them down. But I had one last task to perform.

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The Screwies

Having now rattled around the compound for a while, observing and experiencing the range of CO behavior toward the inmates, it seemed to me that no one fully appreciated their contribution to the quality of camp life. While they had staff appreciation days and many, many training days, including some where they learned how to shoot us with greater accuracy, it just wasn’t clear that the inmates ever had a chance to express their full appreciation for the COs. An awards ceremony seemed to me to be just the ticket.
Perhaps because I’m old enough to remember James Cagney snarling about “the screws” in all those black-and-white prison movies, I decided to call the awards The Screwies. My image for the award itself was of a statuette of Mr. Dyspepsia, one that wouldn’t stand upright unless it had a lead-weighted cigarette in its mouth. Then I set about determining the categories and nominations. Voting was held in secret and I never revealed which of the COs got wind of it and joined in.

At first I thought about developing a newsletter to solicit nominations and report the results, as well as to keep the inmates abreast of other camp rumors. I even went so far as to settle on a name—The Florence Snitch. Then I thought better of it and posted the announcement in disappearing ink in the lobbies of the residence units, right after the midnight count. By 3 am they were gone, but the nominations poured in.

It was tough winnowing the list down, both in terms of categories and nominees. It just seemed like there was an endless supply of material. Eventually I settled on seven broad categories and a total of eight awards.

**Best Pat-Down**

The Best Pat-Down category was split into two sub-categories. **Most Aggressive Pat-Down** went to this CO we called The Whacker who had a dual approach to the task. First he would
pinch your testicles against your inner thigh, then free one before whacking your ball sac and sending your nut on a collision course with your tonsils.

Most Erotic Pat-Down, the other sub-category, had several nominees. One would think that in a camp where the inmates hadn’t interacted intimately with a woman for (often) very long times, that the female COs would have had a lock on this award. While there is a certain tolerance for some homosexual behavior in such settings, there is also a fair amount of homophobia, which made it less likely that the guys were going to admit to finding the pat-downs by the male COs to be very titillating. So I was surprised when this award went to a guy who the inmates (less than affectionately) called The Groper. This guy was only on the compound for a short while, but he left an indelible impression. He would run around in a semi-manic frenzy, stopping guys wherever they were walking, just to pat them down. He seemed to get entirely too much delight out of the process, and some of the guys started trying to avoid him on sight. During my brief encounters with him, he made my clinical antenna vibrate out of my head. After only a few days of this, several guys filed complaints about him and he disappeared, perhaps to take a job as an airport screener. I don’t think he won this award because his pat-downs were particularly erotic, but because the inmates realized that he was getting something out
of it that was more than the typical low-grade debasement and expression of control that seemed to form the core basis for this activity. This guy had to send his partner to collect the award.

**Most Hysterical Overreaction by a Staff Member**

This category had so many nominees that it was very hard to choose. This wasn’t hysterical in the humorous sense, but in the hysteria sense. The winner was this case manager with his response to the Origami Bomber, although the runner-up first bears some mention.

This close second was a more generic staff response to the infamous Bill the Ripper episode, when they tossed this elderly artist in the hole. Bill the Ripper was a meta-potter, a guy who threw pots on the outside, while at sale including a little real pot inside. I suspect this was to the delight of his also elderly customers, many of whom probably fondly remembered the 60s. He considered it creative advertising. Someone had written a crayon note to the COs telling them to look in Bill’s locker. There they found a piece of plastic coat hanger wrapped in duct tape, a shank, if you will. Of course it was duller than the plastic knives they sold us at commissary and much duller than the metal spatula he used for his painting activity. But Bill was off to the hole until they sorted out that it was his bunkie who had planted the coat hanger. Crack detective
work revealed that the coat hanger piece fit perfectly into a missing section of one of his bunkie’s coat hangers, and they were known not to get along well. After a month or so in the hole, Bill the Ripper was returned to the camp, just in time to finish his canvas of a lovely cannabis plant before he went home.

But the winner was the Origami Bomber response. The Origami Bomber was a guy who taught Japanese paper folding through the Arts and Crafts Department. He made the mistake of taking a spray can of glue from the warehouse where he worked, so that he could lacquer the various intricate shapes that he was creating and using for demonstrations in his classes. The can was locked up in the crafts room, but was found during a search-and-seizure event. It was as if they had discovered a receptacle of processed uranium. In fact, based on the response, we wondered if someone had managed to move the WMDs out of Iraq and relocate them to that locker. One case manager in particular seemed to fly completely off the handle. He was almost quivering with some combination of excitement and fear when he told some inmates,

“He could have put that in a microwave and blown up the building!”

The mystery of these kinds of responses lay partly with the fact that inmates in the camp had routine access to and contact
with all sorts of hazardous materials, mostly required in the performance of their jobs. A truly motivated bomber could have cobbled something together and laid waste to the place at just about any time. As luck would have it, when this event occurred there was a banker incarcerated who had been an ordinance specialist during his military service in Viet Nam. We got talking about the Origami Bomber incident over breakfast and he weighed in, first swearing me to secrecy. He didn’t want the COs to know that he had worked on a volunteer basis for his local police, responding should any situation arise where the defusing of ordinance was an issue. For much the same reason I laid low about the fact that one of my first jobs was as an apprentice locksmith, where I had learned how to pick locks. I asked him what would have happened if someone had put the spray can in the microwave and cranked it up.

“Well,” he said laconically, “you might have gotten a light show, and it might have screwed up the microwave.”

“So, the building was safe?”

“Yeah.”

Most Idiotic CO Request of an Inmate

This turned out to be a unanimous vote. It was when the guy ordered us all to cross the compound during the potentially lethal ping-pong ball-sized hailstorm. That event even got a few votes in the Most Hysterical Overreaction Category.
Most Miserable CO

This category required clarification prior to actual voting. Once it was established that we were talking about the one who was the most miserable as a human being in general, rather than the one who treated inmates most miserably, the vote was again unanimous. Mr. Dyspepsia won it hands down. He projected such a cloud of misery in front of him that it was like the event horizon of a psychological black hole. You simply didn’t want to get near him, lest you get sucked in and start looking for a tall bridge.

Most Sociopathic CO

Many of the COs were low-grade bullies, generally in inverse proportion to height. For whatever reason, the job just seemed to pull in marginal, angry people who knew only one way to try to exercise their authority. But only one reached the level of true sociopathy, or as near to it as I cared to experience. By the time the votes were counted, the Dread Huffert had it locked up, but no one had the courage to tell him. Since we hadn’t seen him in some time, we hoped that perhaps it was being conferred posthumously. The award itself became a shared camp voodoo doll, collecting various pins and paraphernalia – even being cross-dressed on occasion.

Most Devious Act by a CO
As with most of these awards, there were numerous nominees, but one seemed to emerge from the pack, at least in the minds of most of the inmates. We called it the Rambo VI Episode.

These two COs got it in their heads that the best way to crack the ring of general inmate malfeasance was through infiltration, so they put on prisoner greens and snuck into one of the residence units.

One could almost imagine the conversation that went on the night before over beers in the local CO bar.

"Is it on for tomorrow?"

"Check."

"Watches? I’ve got 6:45, on my mark . . . mark"

"Check."

"You sure you’re ready for this? It could get messy."

"Someone’s got to do it."

A long pull from a Coors Lite.

"After all, the public expects us to “protect them from what they fear the most.”"

"Check."

Of course, implementation fell slightly short of fantasy. The inmates ID’d them immediately and started laughing. Pretty soon people were gathering and pointing, which was really undermining the significance of the threat. The campaign was
aborted and the MI team withdrew, amid much hilarity and more than a few cat-calls.

There was a brief CO testosterone rebound, marked by threats and shakedowns, but after a few days things returned to normal and the COs in question took brief leaves of absence, perhaps to attend their National Guard meetings.

Had I been brave enough to actually do them as I planned and post the results, I suspect The Screwies would have been an unqualified success, at least with the inmates. But in my heart I knew that the BOP would not tolerate such direct effrontery. So, at the last minute I chickened out and the concept settled back into the backdrop of my mental survival tactics. Although the awards were never really given, the events that would have won them all occurred as described, and I know that for the brief time that would have existed between execution and my trip to the hole, it sure would have been fun.

My fantasy life had now almost totally eclipsed reality. I was no longer the lucid and grounded person I had been upon my entry into the compound. Somewhere along the way my forgetfulness and low-grade inattention had become a variant of dissociation, that psychological state of increasing detachment from what we generally consider to be reality. A few more years
and I suspected I might simply fade away. Realizing this made me only respect the true long-termers more. But my time was up.

I was preparing to leave the compound and found myself reviewing my experiences. I had met some great people, had had a chance to reintroduce myself to sections of my psyche that had been dormant for years, and had tried my hardest to put a positive spin on things. But I had also become aware of aspects of the American justice system that would have been unbelievable to me in my previous life. And I had observed the casual destruction of many, many people by a bureaucracy that seemed to be completely devoid of soul. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I was one Screwie short. There was a final category needed, sort of on the level of Best Picture. It was the grand award, so to speak, the one that put all others in perspective. It was:

Most Asinine and Counter-Productive Life Experience

There was no competition.

Incarceration.
EPILOGUE

IT’S JUST BUSINESS

They say when you are trying to uncover a crime all you need to do is follow the money. My experience with the Justice Department has led me to the same conclusion. If you want to know what they are really up to, follow the money, if you can find it. Once you do, there seems to be an awful lot of it. This is America. It’s all about the money. In fact, this is the American government. It’s really all about the money.

When I went to trial the country was in the middle of the worst financial meltdown in recent memory. Everything was going in the wrong direction, and the level of generalized anger and panic was profound. It was definitely not the right time to be facing a potentially hostile jury with a nuanced tax case. It’s not surprising that the result echoed the Red Queen’s “Off with his head!”
As I sat in my cell over the course of the next two years I became good friends with a guy who was writing a book on macroeconomics, a kind of Macroeconomics for Dummies, if you will. Since, despite the prosecutors’ successful restructuring of my image as a captain of industry, I definitely fell in the category of dummies in economic areas, I was a great test subject for his material.

I had bankrupted myself fighting my charges and now that I was incarcerated it was impossible to contribute to the paying of bills on the outside with my 12-cents-an-hour prison salary. Through the reports of my wife, I watched as loan after loan, some business, some personal, crashed and burned. It was kind of like watching a long caterpillar fall off the end of a table.

At first I felt terrible about this. The prosecutors had worked hard to present me as someone who had sought only to pursue criminal enrichment. In reality my wife and I were middle class, primarily mental health workers who had always paid our taxes and bills. It was very emotionally disturbing for us to literally not be able to do so.

I talked the trauma over with my economist friend numerous times. Finally, with mild exasperation he looked at me and said,

“Bill, I’ve worked with and for banks for years. If they could stick it to you, they would. If they couldn’t pay you
something they owed you, they wouldn’t think twice about it. You have no capacity to pay. You have nothing to feel guilty about. **It’s just business.**”

I kind of heard him, but my ability to obsess and to construct guilt vaporware outweighed his good advice. Then I read *Too Big to Fail*, Andrew Sorkin’s detailed description of the shenanigans pulled by the Wall Street bankers during the Great Meltdown. That took care of my guilt. These bankers had run scams that would have made Mae West blush. For them, it was more like “just bunko” than “just business.”

That message resurfaced several months later when I left the camp and went to the halfway house, that strange netherworld that exists between prison and home. These establishments supposedly serve a combined function. For many state guys they are a sentencing alternative in and of themselves. For us federal guys they are a symbol that we are one step closer to home, although at times it felt like you were walking in an Escher print, or on a mobius strip, one of those twisted loops where you are always moving forward but somehow end up in the same place. In fact, trying to get clear of the federal government once it has you in its radar scope is like going multiple rounds with the Tar Baby.

Actually, I was supposed to go directly from the prison camp to home confinement. The BOP had put out a memo
instructing their staff to take qualified inmates (like me) and bypass the halfway house system by sending them directly to home confinement. Some nine months after the memo was issued, my case manager at the Florence Camp brought me into his office and told me that, since he didn’t believe I needed any transitional halfway house time, I was going to be his test case. Sounded good to me. Now, it is a general rule for inmates in the BOP that if something sounds good, it won’t happen. If it sounds bad, go into duck-and-cover mode immediately. Nondescript and apparently benign is safest. But he said he was going to do this, so I started to hope, a very dangerous psychological state in prison at any time.

Then he called me back in.

“T’ve been looking at the paperwork.”

Oh-oh.

Whenever a bureaucrat starts a sentence with a reference to paperwork, it can only go downhill.

“There’s a lot of paperwork with this that I don’t understand.”

I had noted previously that understanding concepts of more than one mental syllable pushed, if not pegged, his comprehension index.

“I tried to email the guy in Denver who handles this stuff, but he hasn’t answered.”
He was referring to the CCM (Community Corrections Manager) who controlled federal halfway houses and home detention. He was probably in the Bahamas, seeing to his off-shore accounts.

“I’ll tell you what I think we should do.”

Oh-oh again.

“Rather than try to do this paperwork, I’ll move your out-date up a week and just put you through as a halfway house referral. They won’t keep you more than a few days and you’ll go to home confinement at the same time you would have, or even earlier.”

It sounded way too logical. But I didn’t want to appear ungrateful. Besides, I figured he would never find the energy to solve the paperwork issue anyway. So I shoved down my misgivings and agreed. It was really a choice of one.

A month later I left the camp. I carried my stuff up to the door, where Mr. Dyspepsia grilled me about my city of birth and a few other identifiers, just to make sure I wasn’t another inmate who had surgically altered his appearance to look like my picture, perhaps one of the side businesses of the camp’s many tattoo parlors. But it seemed that my fillings were in the right places, and I was set to go.

First I had to stop by the medium-security prison to get any money that was in my account. There, two of us stood at the desk waiting for the guy who clearly had never worked the desk
before to complete this obviously complex task. He was hampered by the fact that the people who needed to do it were outside on a smoke break. That was one way I knew I was not longer in the camp itself. They actually went outside to smoke. Then the three of them filed back in, all of them trotting through the set of two consecutive metal detectors, which went off in rather spectacular fashion. No one blinked, including the guy at the desk. Obviously, the metal detectors were there for show, not security. As they came in, the guy said to them,

“I have two here that need their account money.”

The returnees acknowledged this, while waving gaily, and went back to unload the contraband that they had probably just smuggled into the highly secure facility. And we wonder how inmates get drugs and tobacco into medium and high-security settings. Well, some of us wonder. Most couldn’t care less. Others count on it.

We waited at the counter for about ten or fifteen minutes but no one emerged from the back. Now those of us who were leaving had schedules to keep. The other guy at the counter with me had a complicated bus schedule that was going to take him through Oklahoma on his way to Texas, and had to be at his final destination by 11 pm. I had about five hours for my wife to drive me to a halfway house that was about three and a half hours away. We were hoping to celebrate my release by grabbing
some lunch on the road and I had already lost about a half hour just trying to get to the gate. So I was watching the clock.

I gave them 15 minutes, then said to the guy at the counter, “Maybe they forgot about us?”

It’s been my experience with government employees that forgetting about work is a specialty area.

He assured me that wasn’t the case, waited a little longer, then called the back room. When he got off the phone, he told us, “They forgot about you.”

Kind of thought so.

Finally, they emerged, gave us our money, and I was shuttled to the gate where my wife awaited me, and she drove me to the halfway house in Fort Collins. We passed that Honduras sign again, and again resisted the turn, as we are law-abiding citizens. We both thought that within a week I would be on home detention, helping her out in her business, and we could start to rebuild. But this was the BOP. As I had learned through repeated experiences, the BOP could figure out a way to have wheels fall off a sleigh.

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I arrived at the halfway house on a Friday afternoon. They apparently knew who I was and checked me into my room, a set up with eight guys in four bunk beds. There were 350 people in this halfway house, men and women housed separately, and all but
12 were from the state system. We federal guys were definitely an afterthought. After I met my bunkies, it took me about five minutes to figure out that there was nothing to do but sit in a chair and read. My security status was such that I couldn’t walk outside, or do anything else until I met with my case manager. To be sure there was one TV per wing, with about ten places to sit for about 50 guys, which made me wonder again, -- what is it about the correctional system and chairs? Maybe it’s part of the punishment concept that we are supposed to stand. Lord knows if you are older and lie on the metal beds too long, you’ll never get up, so standing is somewhat safer.

I was given a Program Manual, which I read carefully, as I am inclined to do in these kinds of situations. I have to admit, based on my experience at the camp I wondered how much of it was completely out-of-date, or just plain wrong. Actually, the answer turned out to be quite a bit, that is, until they updated it about a month later, producing a document that converted incorrectness to incomprehensibility in certain areas. Accurate or not, I noticed that it said one could not go to work until attending an “Ethics in the Workplace” class, so I was pleased when I heard such a class announced on Saturday over the loudspeaker. I found the class and attended. My favorite part of the content had to do with the module on sexual harassment.
The instructor looked at the 12 or so, mostly young, aggressive-appearing guys and said,

“You know what it is. Don’t do it.”

And that was that. I was sure that any ensuing lawsuit would consider the issue to have been thoroughly handled by that exchange.

As luck would have it, my case manager worked on Sunday, so I was able to meet with her two days after I had arrived. She introduced herself, and I tried not to be depressed about the fact that she looked about a year younger than my oldest granddaughter. At least she didn’t snap her gum or text during our conversation.

“I don’t have any information about you. They haven’t gotten me your file. So why are you here?”

You know, I’d been asking myself that question for the better part of two and a half years. I know it had something to do with the legal system, but it had gotten so surreal so long ago, that I truly had no idea. I hoped the question was rhetorical because I had long since run out of even semi-logical answers. I decided to answer somewhat obliquely.

“My Case Manager told me I would only be here for a few days, while you processed me through to home confinement.”

There was a pause and she looked confused.

Oh-oh.
“You federal guys are handled through the guys in Denver, so I don’t know anything about that stuff. “

Big oh-oh. When you are dealing with a bureaucracy the minute you hear that the responsibility for something is held by someone else, you know that the person in front of you just ceased to be a resource on the issue. If you have any experience in the correctional system you also know that they just stopped caring and that your ability to get to the person who holds the responsibility will likely be road-blocked. It’s the first step in what always seems to be a royal screw job. After the first few times you can smell it a mile away. I filed that under the “Mull and Readdress” category and shifted gears to another topic.

“Here’s a letter from my employer. I’m hoping to get to work as soon as possible. And I already attended the “Ethics in the Workplace” class.”

Since these halfway houses are all about employment and, as far as I can tell, nothing else, I hoped this was a shared agenda. You see they get 25% of your gross paycheck for making you sleep there instead of at your house, so they have some motivation for you to be working. “It’s just business,” -- I was sure I heard the whisper, perhaps an auditory hallucination signifying my incipient psychotic decompensation.

My comment seemed to strike a positive note.
“I saw that you attended the class. I’ll let you start work on Monday, but your wife will have to drive you until you get me car information.”

This was all good (except for the about three hours of daily driving that just got added to my wife’s schedule) and I left her office. I was worried, but thought perhaps everything would get sorted out about the home confinement issue and I would leave in a few days. At least I was going to get to go to work. While I didn’t want to look a gift horse in the mouth, it was not lost on me that this lady knew absolutely nothing about me (including my charges) and had just approved me to be out of the facility for up to 17 hours a day. Maybe it was my white hair. Maybe it was the limp or the drooling that I had been practicing. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that the sooner I went to work, the sooner they got money. Whatever works.

I went to work for the next few days, trying to ignore my misgivings about the whole home confinement issue. I made her a copy of the inmate-revered almost year-old internal “Memorandum to Chief Executive Officers” of the BOP, the memo that clearly explained how the halfway houses were supposed to be sending us low-risk federal guys to home confinement as soon as they could process the paperwork. Then I tried to put it out of my mind. But it all caught up to me. We met again.
“The guy in Denver says that the BOP and DOJ memo about the home confinement stuff was never adopted, so we don’t follow it.”

I tried not to scream, at least out loud. I think I succeeded, but I’m not sure. I didn’t hear any alarms, so maybe it was all internal. You see, this memo was written in June of 2010 and it was now March of 2011. It had taken the better part of a year for the BOP to finally started implementing it in Florence, but it had started so I knew she was being fed a line of bull. Not only that, but my entire discharge plan had been based on this, and I was now into the time period mandated by federal law at which point I qualified for home confinement. In short, once again they weren’t following laws, or their own regulations and procedures. This is not uncommon in the federal justice system, and is rather routine in the BOP, but this time I wasn’t emotionally ready for it and had to regroup.

“So what does that mean?” I tried not to pant and kept my hands below the table so that the clenching and unclenching wasn’t noticeable.

“That means you have to work the level system. You will spend three weeks at Level 1, 3 weeks at Level 2, Three weeks at level 3, then up to 2 weeks while we transition you to home confinement.”
The scream in my head rose so rapidly that it became supersonic. Somewhere dogs started barking. My anticipated five days at the halfway house had just turned into two and a half months.

It’s kind of amazing when this happens in a bureaucratic system. Usually the person doing it doesn’t have a personal axe to grind. It’s not about you. In fact, they don’t really care at all about you, which is actually the biggest part of the problem. You are a series of boxes to check and they are simply working through the list. The thought that this is your life and that your family is being upheaved by their casual and irrational decisions never enters their heads. It’s simply “check, check . . . . check.” Knowing this intellectually and accepting it emotionally are two very different things. It’s why some people climb into small planes and fly them into federal buildings. More seriously, it’s why the recidivism rate among young, testosterone-soaked males in particular is so sky-high. It’s one of the few times in life when being old is a good thing. The time span between shooting all your adrenalin and being too fatigued to physically act out is pretty short.

I got my breathing under control. I heard Jorge’s voice – “Paciencia, paciencia.”

I found my quiet place. “AUUMMMM.”

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So, I started working and staying out of the facility as much as possible, leaving at 6 am and returning around 8 pm. There was absolutely no reason to be there at all. Because there was no drug or alcohol involvement in my case, there was no programming for me to attend. And I was in the counter-intuitive position of being cleared to work up to 17 hours a day, while not being able to leave the building for anything else until I reached level 2, which was going to take three weeks. I decided to conceptualize this as a slow journey into a biological decontamination chamber, one where the dangerous entity was asinity. I was on Level 1, and throwing off the noxious microbes related to the very fact of my prison experience. When I hit Level 2, it was going to be the viruses infused by the administrative staff. By the time I hit Level 3, I hoped to be clear of the residue of the COs. My wife, who tends to cut more directly to the chase in such situations, summed it up much more succinctly.

“This isn’t about justice or injustice anymore. This is just really STUPID.”

Yup.

It was to get even stupider.

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I got my first paycheck. Having succeeded in calming myself somewhat, I took stock in my situation. According to the
rules of my living arrangement I was to pay them 25% of my gross pay for the pleasure of sleeping in a bunk bed that had the consistency of a cement slab, and for using their shower before going to work for 15 to 16 hours each day. As a federal inmate I was told that I had to do daily BAs and random UAs, despite the fact that alcohol and drugs were no part of my case and the judge had ordered that I would have no need of post-release substance-abuse programming. Our legal and correctional systems in this country were long ago turned into marginally competent versions of substance-abuse treatment centers, since about 90% of the inmates are now there for drug-related activity. It would be a sobering thought, if the lawmakers establishing these systems were sober enough to consider it. Once I figured out how to blow into the tube until I heard the click, and talked my aging prostate into cooperating so that I could hit the little, teeny, tiny vial on command, this requirement was no big deal. But aside from practicing urinal accuracy, I was literally doing nothing else in the halfway house. And since I was going to release to a location that was about an hour away, I had arranged to have my job there. So I was also commuting an hour each way to this fine hotel. I kept trying to find the logic behind all this. There was that phrase again ----- “It’s just business” ----- it kept resonating in my head.
In fact, I assumed it had something to do with the fact that the 25% tithe dropped to 12 1/2% should I ever actually be released to home confinement status. It seemed logical that they would want to make that additional 12 1/2% as long as possible. But I drew that seemingly logical conclusion before I actually tried to give them my money.

My first problem was that I had been away from polite society for long enough that I had forgotten how banks worked. When I tried to convert my first paycheck into a money order at the bank I discovered two important things. The bank didn’t do money orders, and only half of the funds were immediately available to me in any form. For completely unclear reasons I also had to put an additional $400 dollars in a facility-based “savings account” at the halfway house, an amount that had to be there before I could go to home confinement. And I was still harboring fantasies that perhaps that glitch would get resolved and I might be leaving soon. So I wrote my wife a check for the rest of the funds that I needed and had her give me the cash to go with the money order I had obtained from the grocery store. While she was sitting with me I called the halfway house from the phone in my office.

“Now, you guys take money orders and cash, right?”

“Yes.”
Seemed pretty straightforward. This was 11 am. When I drove to the facility that evening after work and went to pay my “rent,” (the euphemism that was applied to my halfway house shower/bed fee) I handed the guy the money order and cash.

“What’s this?”

“My tithe.” I’m a big fan of cognitive restructuring techniques as survival tactics. I was trying to think of it as a quasi-religious experience, perhaps to elevate it above the mundane, perhaps to rescue it from the profane.

“Your what?”

He could be forgiven. He was young and probably hadn’t seen that word used on YouTube in a while.

“My payment to you guys.”

“Your rent?”

I didn’t respond. I just couldn’t bring myself to think of it as rent. He looked in the envelope.

He held up some green pieces of paper with Presidents’ pictures on them. “What’s this?”

“Cash.”

“We don’t take cash.”

Now I had gotten used to this kind of contradictory stuff and wasn’t particularly surprised by this comment. It had been about eight hours since my phone call, long enough for the government to have initiated a new war in the Middle East. The
policy could easily have mutated during that time. But I also wasn’t sure he was right and had learned that it is always good to double check.

“I called today and they told me you do take cash.”

“As of today, we don’t take cash.”

Right. And tomorrow? I thought about submitting the money order part, but the idea of splitting the payment seemed to invite a complete meltdown of their systems. I elected instead to simply take it all back and try again the next day. Perhaps there was a quantum foam anti-cash bubble working its way through the system and it would all be different tomorrow.

As I drove to work the next morning I stopped and converted the cash to another money order. No point in tempting fate. When I returned that night I was armed and ready. I resubmitted my “rent,” with the accompanying clearly identified “Subsistence Record” that my Case Manager had told me to fill out.

“What’s this?”

“My payment. It’s all in money orders. No cash.”

“No, what’s this thing?”

He was holding up the Subsistence Record, the sheet that had “SUBSISTENCE RECORD” printed on the top.

“It’s an original copy of the Magna Carta. Please be careful with it. It’s very valuable.”
I paused. Sarcasm may be a low form of humor but there are situations that simply cry out for it. Yet any kind of humor is lost on the type of person manning a desk in a correctional facility at 8 o’clock at night, particularly the kind where the other guy is sort of the butt of the joke. He merely rattled the sheet, with a slightly belligerent accompanying glare. After my experiences with The Dread Huffert and Mr. Dyspepsia I could tell this guy was a piker, but this was a communication style that I understood and I was technically still incarcerated.

“It’s a Subsistence Record.”

“I’ve never seen one of these. Where’s the Budget Sheet.”

“I’ve never seen a Budget Sheet.”

“Get a receipt.”

This last was almost whispered and clearly didn’t come from the guy in front of me. At first I thought that perhaps I truly was developing auditory hallucinations, but then realized that it had come from an inmate standing to my right. He looked like he knew what he was talking about, perhaps the only person in the immediate environment who did.

“You’re supposed to use a Budget Sheet,” the guy at the desk asserted confidently.

“Did that rule come into effect today?” I asked. I do learn.
“No, you guys always use Budget Sheets; I’ve never seen one of these.”

“That’s the sheet my case manager gave me to use. I’ve never seen a Budget Sheet.”

“Get a receipt.”

Clearly, the inmate on my right had my best interests at heart and wasn’t sure I was listening.

“Well,” the guy at the desk intoned, “I don’t know what to do with this. If you come back tomorrow, maybe someone can help you.”

The chances were good that I’d be there, something I didn’t feel a need to point out. Another staff member heard this exchange and wandered over. Presumably she had more longevity. At least she looked like she might be half rather than a third my age.

“What’s this?” She held up the same Subsistence Record.

“Get a receipt.”

“Ask him,” I said, pointing to her colleague, “I’m new here.” I probably should have directed her to the inmate to my right.

“Where’s the Budget Sheet?”

So it wasn’t a longevity issue.

“I’ve never seen a Budget Sheet.”

“Get a receipt.”
“Don’t worry, I will.” This was an attempt to mollify the
guy on my right who was now shaking his head mournfully and had
begun to mutter, “noo . . . noooo . . .”
“Well, someone could maybe help you with this tomorrow.”
“I’ll be at work all day tomorrow.”
“Get a receipt.”
“I leave really early.”
“Get a receipt.”
“Can’t you guys just take this stuff and pass it on to the
business office?”

I assumed there had to be a Business Office. After all,
someone had to be producing the mythical Budget Sheets. And
someone had clearly printed the Subsistence Record.
“Get a receipt, get a rece . . i . . p . . t . .”

The words faded as my spirit guide wandered off, shaking
his head sadly, just before he appeared to fade through the wall
to my right. Perhaps he was the Ghost of Inmate Past.

All of this caused quite a conference. Clearly this was
going to require a major deviation from normal policies and
procedures. When you do that to a system like this,
particularly after normal business hours, everyone has entered
uncharted territory. Such journeys can lead to independent
thought, which in turn can generate reprisals and other negative
consequences. Hence, their anxiety was almost palpable. What
if they took money with the wrong accompanying form? Would they be censored? Would the sun still come up? Would their retirement be delayed?

I was amazed when about ten minutes later they took a collective deep breath, caved, and took my money. I was even more amazed when they produced a receipt. Behind me I thought I heard a spectral chuckle.

A few days later I had my weekly meeting with my case manager. As I was leaving I commented to her that I had struggled a bit trying to pay my bill. When I explained to her what had happened, she commented,

“They don’t know what they’re talking about.”

No surprise there.

“You federal guys don’t do budgets. You were using the right paper.” There was a pause. “I see that you got a receipt.” Was it my imagination, or did that cause her to glance furtively over her shoulder?

After this experience, I had a much better understanding about why we have budget crunches in certain governmental offices, and how different it is than the kind of small business operations where I was used to navigating. We enjoyed being paid. In fact, we kind of counted on it. Must be nice not to have worry about it.

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After a couple of weeks I had come to terms with the fact that there would be no immediate move to home confinement. I decided to up the ante, figuring I had little to lose at that point. It was going to take me almost three months to get out of there, by which time sleeping on a cement block was going to have turned me into an invalid anyway. I decided to go to the source and called the prison complex in Florence. A person answered.

“Hell. Abandon hope . . . and all that.”

He didn’t really. It was more like “United States Bureau of Prisons. How may I direct your call?”

“May I speak to Frank Müller, please.” That was my Florence Camp case manager who was the architect of my failed discharge plan.

“Is this regarding an inmate?”

Now this was an attempt at screening, but was phrased with sufficient ambiguity that it didn’t accomplish its goal.

“Yes,” I said, quite truthfully.

I was immediately put through.

“This is Müller.”

“Hello, Mr. Müller.” I identified myself. He was obviously a bit disconcerted.

“I’m, I’m surprised they put you through.”

Me, too, but there I was.
“How are things in Florence?”

I was finding that even forced cheeriness was kind of fun. I could almost see his eyes darting around through the phone. To his credit, he tried to chat, sort of, but the idea that he was doing that with an inmate was clearly taxing him. I decided not to force him to be too human lest it cause him permanent damage and described my plight, suggesting that perhaps he should try to intervene on my behalf to see that his discharge plan was being followed. The response was classic bureaucrat.

“Well, the guys in Denver are in charge of all that.”

Uh-huh. I already knew that, in fact, they didn’t even know who he was. After all, the halfway house hadn’t even seen or cared to see my records when devising their discharge plan for me.

He agreed to contact the guy in Denver. I knew he wouldn’t. I agreed not to hold the screw-up against him. I knew I would. It was all good.

“Auummm.”

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Now that it looked like I was in for the long haul I thought I’d better clarify what exactly the policy was with respect to passes. I’d figured out how to work 100 hours a week as a way of having something to do, but for some reason that seemed to be creating an imbalance in my life. The halfway
The halfway house was supposed to be about making a healthy transition to community living, with the stated purpose of reducing recidivism and, thereby, enhancing the safety of our communities. While incarcerated in the camp, there had been at least a few things to do other than work, things like exercise, church, music, education, and the like. These are activities that are presumed to make up elements of healthy living and even in the Byzantine world of a federal prison camp, they were actually mostly encouraged. In the halfway house all of that had suddenly changed. Where I had been walking about ten miles a week, all of a sudden for three weeks I couldn’t leave the building except to go to work. Since my job was an office job, I couldn’t leave that location to grab lunch, or even to take a walk. That meant that exercise consisted of pacing back and forth, unless I decided to ignore the admonitions from the extensive Ethics in the Workplace class and chase someone around the lobby. I was told that after three weeks I could get a two-hour pass each week to exercise, but at least one hour of that was lost in transit to a recreational facility. I could read and sit, if I landed one of the two chairs in the room, or watch TV, if I was lucky enough to corral one of the ten chairs in the TV room. That’s presuming I was interested in the TV fare de jour. I wasn’t. I’d been living a reality show for many years and didn’t feel a need to watch one. And I could read and sit. And
I could sit and read. I could have applied the principle of behavioral modeling and copied the staff’s favorite activity, i.e. surfing the internet, but we weren’t allowed access to computers. There was no other programming for us federal, nondrug guys, and any educational enhancement was a purely internal process. So, faced with an alternative of sheer inactivity, those of us who could organize it opted for working every available hour of the day. It’s probably just a coincidence that most guys were working hourly jobs, so that this particular alternative generated revenue for the halfway house. The little voice whispering “It’s Just Business” in the back of my head was growing in force.

About this time they decided that having no programming at all for the federal guys looked a little fishy. After all, they had to be getting some serious revenue from that federal contract. So they told us that we would have to attend a weekly “journaling” class, one where we would be guided through a structured workbook that would explore all the important features of our criminal activity. Of course, the curriculum had a heavy substance abuse slant, as all things do in our correctional systems these days. That makes some sense, although it left those of us without those issues twiddling our thumbs at critical moments. And it was with disappointment that
Once a week one other guy and I sat in a room together with a social worker, toiling our way through the notebook. After the first week I took the lady aside and tried to explain a couple of things to her.

“You know, I don’t particularly want my background shared with Jonesie.”

She raised a questioning eyebrow, perhaps thinking I was feeling superior to Jonesie in some way. I wasn’t. He seemed like a nice enough guy. He had dealt a lot of drugs, although he said he didn’t use himself, and had spent most of his adult life in the correctional system. Until recently, our histories hadn’t overlapped a great deal.

I tried to explain myself. “You know, I’ve been doing therapy with folks for about 30 years. You let Jonesie know that and, given that he’s the only other person in the room, there’s no way he’s not going to feel ganged up on.”

She saw that point. I pressed a bit further.

“I also spent about ten years working with guys who were incarcerated, going in and out of jails. That is, I was on the other side of the table. Some guys don’t respond well when they know that.” I could tell she was listening and decided to take the full plunge. “And while you seem like a nice and competent
person, frankly I need this whole exercise like I need another navel.”

After a bit more discussion she even agreed to that and said she would try to get me excused.

Like that had any chance. The head guy in Denver made it clear that under no circumstances was I to be excused. I was to attend. Not wanting to throw anyone under the bus, I didn’t point out that there were twelve other federal guys there who were not attending the “mandatory” class, presumably because their case managers hadn’t read the relevant memo. So I settled in.

Perhaps as one effect of the insomnia induced by my cement crypt I elected to no longer censor myself. I knew that some limited measure of professional confidentiality applied, even in a correctional facility “therapy” group, and that as long as I didn’t threaten anyone or reveal a plan to commit a crime, I was in pretty good shape. So I went off at will, and found it kind of cleansing. Half the time I probably sounded like a cross between Rush Limbaugh and Jon Stewart.

After one such particularly eloquent riff about the destructive nature of the American justice system on families, I noticed that Jonesie’s eyes had gotten very big. He reached over to give me a fist bump.

“He speaks Truth,” he said to the social worker.
It’s probably one of the few times that a 60+ white guy had his comments solidly endorsed by someone who was black and under 30. Bonding – it’s a beautiful thing. I have to admit, there was a wee bit of glee accompanying my decision that, if I was going to have to attend this thing, there was going to be no holding back.

After about the sixth meeting, the social worker finally said, “If you think the system is so broken, why don’t you just write about how you would fix it?” So I did. And four months later I mailed her about a 40-page document complete with suggested solutions to problems that I outlined. I never heard back.

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Now according to the manual, between my journaling classes and work I did qualify for passes. During the first three weeks it was only a two-hour pass for church. I’m not a churchgoer and tried to substitute playing basketball at the Church of the Holy Hoop. It wasn’t on the approved list. Asatru paganism is, so if I had just stopped every third trip down the court, thrown my fist in the air and yelled, “All hail, Thor!” it might have flown. Lacking that, or any other real established religious base, I had to wait out those first three weeks.

But then I reached the magical Level 2 and qualified to go to the convenience store, go to a rec center once a week, and
take a 6-hour pass to visit my “release location,” otherwise known as the home where I had been living for about twelve years before driving myself to the Florence camp. My wife and I prepared ourselves for the big moment.

Because my home was in the country about an hour away from the halfway house, I had arranged my job in that area. After all, I was going to be living there, come hell or high water, in about two months. That meant that while I commuted two hours each day, my job was about five minutes from my house, not that I could go there at any time during work hours. In fact, when it came time to take my first 6-hour pass to my house, I had a choice. I could sit in the halfway house from the time I woke up at 5 am until the afternoon, go to my house, then go back to the facility in the evening. That would have put me in a chair for about 12 of the 18 hours I was usually awake each day. The alternative was a masterpiece of bureaucratic inflexibility. I went to work at 6 am, in the early afternoon drove the hour back to the halfway house, parked my car, walked in, checked in, turned around, checked out, drove an hour of my pass to my house, then an hour back in the evening. When my wife heard how that was unfolding the “stupid” that had become her new favorite epithet moved into the capital letter and exclamation mark territory.
Nor did even that, as lunatic as it was, prove to be quite that simple. Having accepted the inevitability of the screwy pass process, I went to implement it. I had spent the morning at work and driven back to the facility. I checked in, remembering to go do my BA, where I was told that I was now done for the day and didn’t have to do any more screens. I thought about the fact that I was about to go check out for a lengthy pass to my home, where it is presumed I would be most inclined to be motivated to have a beer or a glass of wine. Yet I was doing so knowing that there were no further substance abuse checks for this day. Whatever. It all just got filed in the “continuing illogic” category and I turned around to check out on my pass to my house. The guy manning the exit window had his nose buried in his computer screen, which seems to be the preferred activity of all working Americans these days. I thought I heard the unmistakable sound of a shuffling deck of cards.

“I’m heading out on my 6-hour pass.”

He took a break from whatever he was doing and inspected the screen carefully. It was taking too long. Call it a sixth sense or a residue of BOP involvement, but I could already tell that this was headed south.

“You don’t have a pass.”
I was beginning to see a developing theme in this setting. It didn’t matter if there was something that was enshrined in law, regulation, or procedure, when you went to implement it somehow it simply wasn’t in force. It either wasn’t the right day, your shirt was the wrong color, or someone else had neglected to do his or her job correctly. The only constants were that what you were trying to do wasn’t going to work and it wasn’t the fault of the person in front of you.

“'I’m supposed to have a pass. I’m Level 2.”

He looked and without raising his nose from the screen he elevated his forefinger, I presume meaning that the computer was telling him that I was still Level 1. I also raised a finger, signifying something else altogether. In fact, I briefly considered snapping his finger off at the root and lobotomizing him with it as a surrogate scalpel. But even with so much of my previously civilized demeanor increasingly in tatters, I’m not the type to resort to violence, so I settled for internalized and fantasized mayhem.

“That’s not what my case manager said.”

He continued to explore his computer screen, perhaps thinking that the entry he was examining was going to change. Either that or he was trying to finish the instructional poker video he was watching that I was so rudely interrupting.
"I saw my case manager in the building; why don’t you just call her?"

To his credit, and my surprise, he actually did this. There was a brief conversation, followed by a muttered “I thought so,” which was then followed by a supercilious look at me after he hung up.

“Your level doesn’t change until tomorrow, on Monday. We change our levels on Monday.”

“It changed last Monday.”

I was at a distinct disadvantage. As a felon, in many people’s eyes I had no credibility in any setting, but this was particularly the case when interacting with those who work in law enforcement. And in addition to having all the power, he had the computer. These days he who holds the computer holds the key to truth, and no refutation is even conceivable. Before I could stifle myself, two years of frustration boiled out of my mouth,

“Could this place get any stupider?”

It was meant to be rhetorical, although the answer wasn’t a complete given. They had shown marked abilities in that area so far. But it also generated a victorious look. He had made me lose my cool, ergo, had done his job correctly.

“Why? Because we make our changes on Monday?"
“Never mind.” I had regained my balance and was giving up. As the Trekkies say about the Borg, “resistance is futile.”

The phone rang again. There was another conversation. This one produced a notable change in demeanor. He went from smug, to slightly chagrined, to finding low-grade hilarity in something related to the situation. We must have been involved in a different situation.

“That was your case manager. Your level changed last Monday. The computer is wrong.”

“I rescind my remark.”

“What?”

It was a slightly obscure word but I repeated it anyway.

“I rescind my remark.”

At the moment I was too annoyed to translate into correctionalese. Besides, my teeth were clenched and I was being disingenuous. I didn’t rescind it at all. The place had left stupid at the starting gate days ago.

“Are we all better?” he said, having settled into condescension as his normal state.

“Thank you,” said I, trying to regain my civility. The repressed response was, “We will be, right after your lobotomy.”

I had made it out the door, so that I could spend one third of my pass driving to the place where I was supposed to be taking the pass, thus demonstrating my readiness to reintegrate
into polite society. Or perhaps I was demonstrating my readiness to commute to polite society. I like to think that I passed both tests.

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Three weeks later I crawled over the bar to the much coveted Level 3. I thought I heard a celestial chorus, but my tinnitus had been acting up and it was becoming increasingly easy to confuse the two. Not much actually changed, other than my eligibility for even more passes. The ones that really got my attention were the three 3-hour passes that could be combined into one 6-hour pass. I looked at the math again, thinking I must have made a mistake. But that’s what it said, and upon checking, that’s what it was – 3 plus 3 plus 3 equals 6. This wasn’t the first time I’d run into these kinds of math issues in the BOP, but each time it was something of a surprise. Whoever wrote the regs would have been well served to attend my GED classes at the camp, where we covered basic arithmetic rather thoroughly. Still, I was now able to take one 6-hour pass and two 12-hour passes each week to my home, returning only to sleep on my slab at the halfway house in the evenings, mostly to make sure that my back stayed screwed up enough that I would have to sit in a chair during my passes. It was all designed to keep me out of trouble. If I couldn’t move, I couldn’t dance. And we all know what dancing leads to. I suppose one could also argue
that I was being slowly and safely titrated back into my home environment, ignoring the fact that with their methodology my wife was becoming increasingly homicidal toward the correctional system in general and probably presented the greater societal threat. But I really think they were merely protecting their investment. If I suddenly disappeared, there went that 12 1/2%. The whisper had progressed to something of a low roar – “It’s only business.”

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Throughout my time at the halfway house I worked for my son-in-law’s trucking company. If there was ever a person more poorly suited to work in the trucking industry, I would like to meet him. We probably would have gotten along famously. And it was a business owned by members of my family, which was supposed to be a complete no-no in the world of the halfway house. When the issue of working came up, I had given them several options, first settling on working at a company owned by my wife. Then they decided that working for my wife’s company was unacceptable, a plan that had been in place for a year and had been endorsed by my case manager at the prison camp. I might add, they came to this conclusion after I had already worked there for a month. So I started scrounging around for alternatives. Being a 61-(soon to be 62)-year-old felon facing the highest unemployment rates in decades suggested some
possible obstacles. Nor was I easily hirable in any of my previous career areas, for a variety of reasons. After some digging, in addition to the trucking company job I found someone who was willing to take me on as a ranch hand, and my attorney offered to employ me, possibly hoping to work me to death as a pay-back for all the pro bono work he had been doing on my case. I think when it came down to it, the administrators at the halfway house were afraid I might not survive the ranch work, didn’t want the liability, and were equally fearful that I might do well in the legal environment, possibly to their detriment. So they broke the mold and sanctioned my employment by my son-in-law in the trucking industry. I survived, the company survived, and the halfway house got their 25%. I left every day at 6 am, drove the hour to my office, each day resisting the impulse to drive the extra five miles and sit down for a morning cuppa with my wife. I like to think that I became an invaluable asset to the trucking company, but that would be fantasy. I know that after a while the guys who came in the office stopped asking in a low voice, “Who the hell is that?” After everyone had left the office for the day, I would contemplate the odd vagaries of fate for a while, then climb back in the car and head for my slab. It was all good.

After some weeks of this I had navigated my way through the various obstacles and had reached Level 4. I felt like I
was playing a video game based on my life, but one where I wasn’t allowed to use faux weaponry to blow up the bad guys. Level 4. I was ready to transition to home confinement. I didn’t care if it was forced to wear an ankle bracelet, a dominatrix suit, or a flea collar. I was ET. Just let me go home.

Of course it wasn’t quite that simple; it never was. Each week I could now go to my home for a 48-hour pass and a 12-hour “flex” pass, as well the famous 3+3+3 = 6-hour pass. Things were feeling almost normal. I spent the first night staring at this strange, fluffy thing that conjured up memories of a bed. Of course, with the 48-hour pass I had to drive back to the facility each morning to tell them I was alive, a two-hour round trip. I offered to skype them, but you discover early on that this branch of government is seriously behind in matters of technology. It’s part of why they insist you reinstall a landline at your house so that you can get junk phone calls again, rather than having you get a cell phone with a GPS.

So, now that I was level 4 I met with my case manager and was told that it would take about ten days to transition me out the door. Since that transition consisted solely of a lecture about not doing things that for the last several months I had been in every position to do if I were so inclined, it seemed like something of an empty duplication. And my only real
question was whether I was going to short out the ankle bracelet in my kids’ hot tub. Since this seemed to be a process of some complication for them, I thought maybe they were going to track me on a sheet, clearing one body part a day, sort of like a reverse game of hangman. But I had also learned some things about how to cope. I sat down with a schedule book and worked it out so that the last five days of my halfway house time were spent on pass. Of course, there was still my daily two-hour check-in commute in the mornings that wiped out any progress my back had made the night before by sleeping in an actual bed. But finally even they couldn’t think of another stall tactic to further extend their additional 12 1/2% and I walked out the door, all electronically tagged like a Colorado elk.

I would be driving two hours back-and-forth each week for the next month to have a 5-minute meeting with my home confinement case manager (not to be confused with my first case manager who was rapidly becoming a distant memory), as well as to attend my ever-educational journaling group. And I had to call each morning to see whether my “color” group was on the list for those who had to report for UAs, potentially occasioning another 2-hour round-trip, since the feds refused to contract with any of the testing sites that were much closer. And, yes, I had to explain at one point that the ankle bracelet fell off for no clear reason, and I had accessorized it with
duct tape rather than driving back at 2 am to get it reaffixed more formally. But, then, it took them five days to respond to the phone message I left when it fell off, so they couldn’t have been that concerned about it. Yes, I really was leaving. I had crawled through the bowels of the American justice system and was being expelled back into polite society only slightly tarnished and a bit worse for wear. I even figured that the pulsating red “F” on my forehead would fade with time.

Above all, the voice in my head had stopped chanting, perhaps because I no longer needed convincing. It’s not about justice, or truth, or even societal control, really – it is, indeed, “just business.” But let me tell you, in true American fashion we have created a business like few others, one where the referral stream is the government itself. If the product lags, they just up the DOJ’s budget and there is an immediate improvement to the bottom line. It is one helluva franchise opportunity for the opportunistic. I made a mental note to look into it, right after I finished with my mobile debtor’s prison called “restitution,” and before I ran for the border.
LAST THOUGHTS FROM THE AUTHOR

It’s now been almost two years since I left the prison camp in Florence, and I have been off probation for almost a year. That has been time for the rawness to settle down and for me to develop some perspective on the events of the last ten years. If you have read this far, perhaps you will want to read a little further. In what follows I would like to present things a bit more seriously, since there really is nothing about my experiences that will forever be filed for me under the title of “amusement.” Any imprisonment at any level is a nasty, demeaning experience. So let me speak to that from my current point in the recovery curve.

The bulk of this book was written in pieces, on a malfunctioning typewriter in the prison camp’s library, mostly during my period of incarceration. Since the BOP doesn’t take well to people who openly criticize it, just writing this was something of a risk. They make it clear that they consider anything that divulges details about the actual operations of a
prison to be a significant security risk and will react accordingly. Had anyone bothered to read what I was carrying around it would likely have resulted in a trip to the hole for me, at the very least. There is an even greater likelihood I would have been shipped off somewhere, and my family put through some serious hoops just trying to find me again.

As I say that, it’s important to know that I did nothing wrong or illegal in writing this, as the courts have weighed in very clearly that prisoners retain their rights to free speech even while incarcerated. But like many other things that occur while you are in prison, there is a huge gulf between laws, regulations, and practice. And while the courts write rulings, they don’t really oversee the BOP’s day-to-day actions.

Let me give you an example. While there is an established internal appeals process for prisoners’ complaints, it is structured so that it takes about one and a half years to get a complaint through the gauntlet and even to a court. Once there, the prisoner’s brief is typically screened by a judge whose response is cursory and suggests it wasn’t really read. I know this because I filed one such brief about one aspect of BOP practice, and read numerous others filed by my compadres.

Despite what may get reported in the press, the courts are not much of a resource for prisoners and you really are on your own while incarcerated. It is best to think of yourself as at
the mercy of an organization that lacks any real oversight and to behave accordingly. So I took a chance by both writing and mailing this manuscript to someone outside so that it wouldn’t get lost should my copy be confiscated. That person also took a chance by simply accepting it. This may sound like a paranoid overstatement, but these days the federal justice system likes to use the charge of conspiracy. It may have been developed for combating organized crime, but it is now widely applied in a variety of cases. Part of the reason for that is the definition of conspiracy is vague, which allows for a lot of latitude in its application. And it carries large penalties, making it fertile ground for the plea bargaining process. Stated simply, the person who accepted this manuscript and held it for me was at some risk for being seen as a conspirator. While not exactly the law, that is the reality of our system.

So if I knew it might be risky, why did I do this? As I said at the outset of this book, I cope with things best when I can see the humorous aspect of them. One can only wail and gnash one’s teeth for so long before it drives both the gnasher and those suffering in proximity to the gnashing quite crazy. And writing quiets me during times of internal turmoil. But that was only a part of my motivation. At the risk of sounding like just an angry ex-con, mostly I felt that it was important that someone try to educate people about the insane system we
have created, as well as to try to get them to see how destructive it is to our society. The way we are currently doing things damages everyone, from those who participate on the front end and those who work in the middle, to those who oversee the back end. No one benefits from helping to prop up a dysfunctional, frequently corrupt, and at least somewhat abusive system. No one. To allow it to continue demeans us all. The sooner we understand that, the sooner we can start working to change it.

At one point my Probation Officer asked me if I thought prisons were filled with innocent people who had been abused by the system. I had the sense that he was mostly checking a box about my attitude and gave him a fairly cursory answer. The truth is that there are many things that distort our legal system and have helped create the belief in me that we are busily incarcerating both the guilty and the innocent in this country. And after decades of this, we have created a massive incarceration industry, one that now has economic inertia and must be fed. Prosecutors and courts are the feeders. If you take the time to read any international publications you will see that the rest of the “developed” world thinks that we are completely loony on this topic, and more than a little dangerous. After my experiences, I agree with them.
So how am I doing today? Thanks for asking. The answer is I’m not sure. Clearly I feel more normal and have returned to many of the activities that previously occupied me. I feel like I’ve taken the system’s best shot and I’m still standing, although there’s no question that I’ve changed as a result. And some of the changes have been hard to both recognize and understand. I was pretty old when this all started, which is both a blessing and a curse when you are imprisoned. The younger guys don’t waste time hassling you about the more potentially volatile issues, which is a good thing. But you also have had a life and typically know what’s important. It doesn’t take long to realize that incarceration isn’t on that list. It’s simply something stupid to be survived. And being even older when you do get out, you have much less time to recover, either emotionally or financially.

Age brings one other feature that is hard to sort out. The medical treatment is so poor in the federal prison system that most of us who had any real medical knowledge at all simply avoided it. But medical problems are also a part of the normal aging process. After I got out I found myself suddenly struggling with a number of symptoms that were unusual for me. After going through a lot of diagnostic tests and escalating interventions, most of that got sorted out. But to this day I can’t tell whether the physical changes I’ve experienced are a
by-product of the incarceration conditions or simply normal aging. I’ve just had to learn to adapt.

The emotional changes are even more subtle and difficult to sort out. At first, everything just felt like it was moving too fast and that I couldn’t catch up. I got confused the first time I tried to pump gas, for example, and felt like just driving off to get away from the situation. It seemed like I was expected to make rapid decisions all the time, and I drove my wife crazy by always wanting to just stand there long enough to completely evaluate the situation. After thinking about it I realized that it was a defense I had developed in an environment when any poorly thought out action could generate a nasty consequence. So I was always looking over my shoulder. Now you might think that I was looking for a potentially attacking inmate, since that’s the image TV has promoted to the public, but that was never the issue in the camp. What I had learned to look out for were irrational outbursts from COs, any one of which could carry significant negative consequences. I had only spent two and one half years in a prison camp (which by the standards of many inmates is nothing), but I found that it had permanently altered my view of law enforcement. As a Licensed Clinical Psychologist I used to work with law enforcement officials closely in my job. I was in and out of the jail all the time, helping them intervene with difficult or troubled
inmates. Now I see any form of police as a potential threat, an attitude that I can’t seem to kick. I keep expecting one of them to fly off the handle over nothing, something I witnessed countless times. It would take a very extreme circumstance for me to even consider calling law enforcement for assistance in any matter. I simply no longer trust them to behave objectively at all. At this point I don’t know if that attitude will ever fade completely.

And I admit that I have lost all respect for the judicial system. While I didn’t go into many details about that in this book, suffice it to say that I no longer believe anything I see in the press about a particular case. There is simply too much systemic control over the information that is being presented. This whole experience has taught me that what actually goes on in investigations, trials, and the process of judges writing rulings is radically different than what we were led to believe. The loss of innocence that has accompanied my realizations in these areas has been the real casualty in all this.

So am I surviving? Yes. Am I damaged? Yes. Is it reparable? I don’t know. Only time will tell. I do know one thing for certain. I no longer even bother asking myself, “Why?”