

On ~~Monday~~ Monday

Several dozen members of my Rotary Club were given a lunchtime tour of the Humboldt County Correctional Facility, i.e., the county jail. The facility was clean and seems to be well run by a staff who appear conscientious.

It was sobering to think that some 75 inmates often occupy the room in which we were eating. They can interact, but only with supervision. We were told how the inmates sometimes conspire to distract the guards so they can shove someone into the bathroom area and beat them up. Perhaps more sobering ~~was~~ ^{was: my} the realization that our county's largest building is our ^{new} jail: 155,00 square feet, and eight floors, housing up to 400 inmates and occupying the Civic Center and County Seat. What if instead of putting millions of dollars into prisons, we put our tax money into something like skateboard parks and ice skating rinks, which are all too scarce in Humboldt County? Or schools, libraries and good books?

We were told about the older jail that had the linear model jail cells, you know, the kind you see in most of the movies with the long rows of barred cells that look loud and drafty but keep the inmates apart. As we neared the end of our tour we viewed some inmates in their ^{new} jail cells, I realized they were not behind bars, they were actually behind a glass door that looked almost hermetically sealed. ~~The~~ feeling of suffocation came on me as I gazed upon the curious but sad faces behind those prison doors. County jails were not built to house prisoners for more than a year, but according to our hosts, it is not uncommon for people to spend up to four years or more in a county jail nowadays. Sobering.

Do you find it ironic that in the so called Land of the Free and home of the brave, we have the largest prison population in the world? That's right, we have over a million people incarcerated in our jails and prisons; which leads me to wonder if something is not going terribly astray with the American experiment in freedom.

But,

I was glad to hear from Captain Ed Wilkinson that the old philosophy of incarceration, ~~which~~ ~~was~~ "Lock em up and throw away the key," has been replaced by a newer one that strives for rehabilitation and vocational training. One of the young ladies there was candid enough to admit her Mother had been incarcerated, and ^{had} found it very difficult to find a job when she got out. So the call went out to ~~some~~ our Rotarians to take a look at hiring a former inmate. Maybe some local business owners would be willing to take the risk to hire men and women who've done time. But, I am reasonably sure if the ~~former~~ inmate stumbles back into a life of drug addiction, theft, or violence, they won't stay employed for long. ~~Rehabilitation burns like a candle of hope for those who are locked up in our many jails and prisons.~~ ^{how can we help it happen?}

There are different forms of rehabilitation these days, some of them are religiously based. It may surprise you to know that the Bible states: "Remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them..." Why does it say that? ^{Probably} because none of us is so virtuous that we can avoid the sobering thought, "There but for the grace of God, go I."

This has been Dan Price for Community Commit