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4th of July at FPC Yankton

Celebrating the 4th of July at a BOP (Bureau of Prisons) facility is one of the few places in the USA where the holiday can be celebrated with “eyes wide open” because the health of the State among Federal prisoners is seen unfiltered. The almost universal experience of the unjust US justice system has given this convicted group of citizens a window in which the searing truth of our thoroughly unjust criminal justice system can be seen.

Do not misunderstand me here. There are a lot of guys here who were involved in criminal activity. The issue lies not with them but with the justice system that prosecuted, tried, convicted sentenced, and put them in prison. At every stage of the process, gross injustices take place. A lot of these guys were entrapped into committing the crime that they were convicted of. Any justice system that has to create a crime to catch a criminal is unjust. If they were not entrapped to commit a crime, they were snitched on by a fellow drug dealer for conspiracy. Any prosecutor who needs the testimony of one criminal to convict another criminal is selling the principles of justice for a higher conviction rate. It's legal. It is not just.

Then by the time people are sentenced, the prison time given for the crime committed far exceeds the nature of the crime committed. So with the 4th of July comes around, while the rest of the country is patting itself on the back, having family picnics and community parades, shooting fireworks off at night, there is this whole, most hidden, population of current and former BOP inmates who know better about what this country is all about.

What has always struck me whenever I return to a BOP facility is the open and welcoming reception I am given by the inmate population regarding my stand against the US government. A lot of these guys would not have given me the time of day before their convictions. Most were your typical simple-minded patriotic American. They believed the dominate nationalistic mythology that covers the dirty deadly truths that lie behind our empire known as the USA.

Their personal experience through the justice system has given them a “looking glass” perspective into the way things really are and they are now open to seeing how what has happened to them is also happening to so many others whom the government deems a threat and unimportant to the national agenda. My reasoning for protesting nuclear weapons, my reading of the US foreign policies, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and my asking the real question that we as a nation should be asking on this 4th of July, “Are we a republic or an empire?” gets a positive reception from the guys I am locked up with.

Though there are many things done in our name as a nation that should put us to shame, there are many good things being done in this country also. To be able to see the “Kingdom of God” good things happening in the US, we need to put on the lenses of a Beatitude perspective. This means we start to measure the good from the bad by turning what the world holds dear and true upside down. It calls for a discipline sight in which that which matters comes from the bottom up (not from the top) from the margins of society (not at the center where power and wealth reside) in those random acts of love and sacrifice that people do that rarely get reported in the media.

That is the way news of the latest Plowshares Witness from the western plains of North Dakota brought a real sense of hope and inspiration to me in the Federal Prison Camp. Calling themselves the Weapons of Mass Destruction Here Plowshares, three brave souls,

Fr. Carl Kabat, OMI, Greg Boertje-Obed and Michael Wallie took hammers and blood to an E-9 Minuteman III Missile Silo on the Madan, Hidatsa, Arikara Nation about 75 miles southwest of Minot, ND, on June 20, 2006.

Dressed as clowns, looking the part of being fools for Christ, these three Catholic peacemakers used household hammers to beat on the silo lid that covers a 300 kiloton nuclear warhead. They painted "It's a sin to build a nuclear weapon" on the face of the 110 ton harden silo cover along with pouring their own blood on the lid.

They added their disarmament action to the over 100 plowshares actions that have taken place since the first Plowshares Witness in 1980 when the Berrigan brothers, Dan and Phil, with six others entered a GE Nuclear Weapons plant in King of Prussia, PA, and took hammers and blood to nuclear weapons components in the making. Fr. Carl Kabat was one of the original Plowshares activists and has participated in numerous other Plowshares actions, this one being his latest. Fr. Carl is 72 years old and has done over 16 years of jail time for his peacemaking efforts.

Greg Boertje-Obed is a US Vet and a veteran of several other Plowshares actions. Greg is a Duluth Catholic worker. He is married to fellow Plowshares activist and Duluth Catholic Worker Michele Naar-Obed. They have an 11 year old daughter, Rachel Obed. I know both Fr. Carl and Greg very well. I know of Mike Walli, a 57 year old Vietnam veteran and Roman Catholic peace activist of many years. They were all arrested by the McLean County Sheriffs and last I heard are being held at the McLean County Jail, charges pending. Please keep these dear people in your thoughts and prayers. They risk much for their witness for peace. They are likely at the front end of a long separation from the people they love and hard time to endure for being the best of what American Catholics have to offer the world as peacemakers for the Kingdom of God. For updates on their case, contact Jonah House, 1301 Moreland Ave, Baltimore, MD 21216, www.jonahhouse.org. or the folks at Nukewatch, PO Box 649, Luck, WI 54853, www.nukewatch.com.

The 4th of July here was treated like any Saturday or Sunday. Aside from the guys who worked in the kitchen, gym and library, it was a no-work day. There were lots of games and sporting events inmates could sign up for. The main meal featured chicken and ice cream. The chicken was greasy and the ice cream was freezer burned. There was a spot in front of Kingsbury Housing Unit where inmates were allowed to view the town fireworks display over the tree tops. It was not much of a show. It lasted thirty minutes. That night an inmate in our housing unit attempted suicide. He was physically and mentally handicapped. He was often picked on by other inmates. He was not a pleasant man. He did not belong at this camp. They moved him.

The 4th of July also marks my halfway point for the time I have to do at Yankton. I've been here 50 days and I have 50 more days to go. My time here has been some of the easiest time in my prison career. My being older, it being my 8th time through the process and that I come into this six-month bit well prepared has a lot to do with it being easy time.

The first thing I did when I got to camp was to try to find myself a job. Past experience taught me that if I did not find a job, a job would be assigned to me, usually in landscape or in the kitchen washing dishes. I have done both of these jobs in the past and was not interested in doing them again. The first place I went seeking work was the chapel. I had a great relationship with the former Chaplin and was hoping to get an "in" with the new one.

To my surprise, the new Chaplin is a Catholic priest from the Davenport, IA, diocese, Fr. Greg Stekel. Fr. Greg had heard of me and knew ahead of time that I was on my way to

Yankton. We hit it off well right away. He let me sit in on an RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults) class he was teaching the first night I dropped in to see him. I asked Fr. Greg if it was going to be possible for me to get a job in the chapel. He said he already tried getting me on. He asked the captain who said, "No way." The "powers that be" here at Camp did not want me in the chapel. I took the rejection in stride. It was enough to be on good footing with Fr. Greg and I knew I would plug in at the chapel in other ways.

Next I went to my counselor, Mr. McKee, to talk about a job. I told him I was not up to doing landscape and kitchen work because of my age and heart concerns. He knew of an opening in the laundry and recommended I apply to work there. I did and it a week I was assigned to laundry. The first thing you need to know about the laundry here is that there is no institutional laundry facility on campus. All inmates do their own clothing laundry in washers and dryers in the housing units. All other institutional laundry is sent out to a laundry service in town.

What we do in laundry is distribute camp clothing and bedding to inmates. It's a sweet job. There are 12 inmates assigned to the laundry. We fit out new men arriving with clothing and bedding and check out everyone leaving the camp. We also do "call outs" for replacement and exchange clothing. I am a tagger. A tagger irons on white tags that have inmates' last names and the BOP numbers onto shirts, t-shirts, pants and coats. We do other things also like re-stocking the clothing shelves, sorting out incoming and outgoing laundry for the town laundry service. We always have more guys than we need for the work. I would say we work one third of the time. The rest of the time we can read, write and sleep. I do a lot of my writing during work hours. The job is perfect for me and my needs. There is good comradeship among the inmate crew who work in laundry. Everyone has a nickname. Mine is the Professor.

Another stroke of good luck came my way when I signed up for a 10 week aerobics class at the gym. It takes place every Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons during work hours. It is just what I need to be doing physically. When I hit camp, my physical shape was poor despite my best efforts in the county jails. If life continues as it is here, I should hit the streets a few pounds lighter and in much better shape than when I got locked up.

Though I'm not allowed to work in the chapel, I've been able to plug into its programs especially the Catholic ones. I attend the weekly Legion of Mary group and Fr. Greg and I have started a weekly lectionary bible study. I've taken over responsibility for writing the prayers of the faithful for Sunday Masses. I am also allowed to use a typewriter in the chapel and spend a lot of my typing time there.

My relationship with the guards and administration is very cordial and friendly. Most know who I am and my history with the place. Many are the same people who were here in the 1990's. There are a lot of people who are on staff who are close to retirement. Fr. Greg says in two years there will be a whole new turn-over in staff, either from retirement or from regular BOP rotations. The people who deal with me directly: my Unit Director, Counselor, my work foreman, housing unit guards and kitchen supervisors all seem to remember me from my previous visits. Several have asked how I am doing and what I am up to these days. Many are curious about my standing with the church and whether I am still a priest or not.

One of the work foremen who work at the laundry and I have some history. When I was on my second tour of duty here in 1994-95, we were publishing a monthly newsletter called the **Inside Word** with the writings of folks doing time for crossing the line at Offutt AFB. There were three of us in jail at that time: Brian Terrell, Sam Day and myself. In the last issue that

my writings appeared my Camp mug shot appeared on its cover. These mug shots are the black and white head photos that the Camp used to identify us while we were there. It was put on our identification cards and a copy of it was placed in our housing units, at our work place, with the main office, and at the medical building. A managed to lift a copy of this 2" by 1" photo and sent it back to the Des Moines Catholic worker. These mug shots were not supposed to leave the Camp. Unwittingly, the issue with the mug shot on the cover was sent to me a week before I got set free. I did not receive it until the last day on my way out of the Camp.

My "G" was the last person I saw on the way to the door. This was the final station where release papers were signed and inventory of the stuff I was taking was checked out. As I was about to go out the door, Mr. "G" put the issue of the *Inside Work* on top of the counter and asked me how my mug shot got on the cover of this publication. I told a lie and told him I did not know. He informed me that we had to do one final strip search. It was a thorough search that included a full body cavity search. It was a raw moment for me.

As Mr. "G" led me out the door and to the curb, my support people and some press people were waiting for me. The last thing I did was to turn around to Mr. "G" and shake his hand thanking him. It was the same hand he did his cavity search with. A photo of us two shaking hands appeared in the Yankton newspaper the day after.

When we first reconnected this time, I reminded Mr. "G" that we shared an intimate moment years ago. He remembered. No more needed to be said. We are both older and wiser now. He is not a bad guy to work for. If I were to be in a similar situation today, I would tell him the truth. And I bet he would choose a different way to deal with it.

Getting to know the inmate population at Camp is not as easy as getting to know county jail inmates. Mostly this is because of the length of time people are serving. In county jails, people are locked up for a few months then they are either set free or moved on to another prison. Here at a Federal prison camp, people are serving years of prison time. I asked the guys in the laundry what they thought the average sentence was for people at this Camp. They said that would be a hard thing to figure out because it is always changing. I asked, "What do you mean, changing?" They see the inmates who are leaving Camp to return to their Federal districts to appear in court – most likely to snitch. Laundry sees these folks coming and going because they need to be dressed out and in e very time. And a lot of guys come back with their sentences cut in half. The laundry crew's guess is that 90% of the inmates at Yankton are serving two to ten year sentences. Our work foreman agreed with their assessment.

In any case, when I arrived with less than three months on my sentence, most guys are reluctant to invest any energy in getting to know me. There are a few guys that were here when I was here last and most of them remember me. And my past history has helped my reputation among with inmate population. I'm getting to know some of the guys who hang around the chapel. I am making natural bonds with the laundry crew. There are some guys here that I was in jail with both at the Pottawattamie and Jackson County jails. I've gotten close to a couple of brothers from a small town in Nebraska. They are here doing five years on meth charges. We usually eat together and fix up late night goodies. Generally speaking, once folks find out why I am here and how often I have returned, I am given a measure of respect.

The real issue that inmates here are dealing with is the amount of time they are serving. I remember the first week I was here, one night I was walking back to my housing unit after eating supper and enjoying the knock-down beautiful spring day. The Camp was postcard

beautiful, everything green, flowers in full bloom, and the smell of lilacs was in the air. I said out loud, "What a beautiful place!" There was an African-American inmate right next to me. He casually nodded. Then I asked him how long he had been at Yankton. He said since 2000. I said, "I guess beauty can run thin." He nodded and replied, "No kidding."

This place reminds me that a gilded cage is still a cage. Too many guys are doing too many years for what little criminal activity they did. Many are living better physically than their families. Most are far away from their home towns and their loved ones rarely can come to visit. The marriage breakup ratio for the BOP is 85%! Guys are doing hard time here and it has nothing to do with the physical surroundings and everything to do with the stress and heartache they bring with them from the outside.

The hardest hit population is the African-American inmates. They are not only a long way from family and friends doing more time than they need to be doing. They also have to deal with the subtle and not so subtle racism that is endemic in the culture here. It is not uncommon for me to hear racial slurs and racial comments among the white inmate population. It let it be known that I do not welcome such comments and most know I am not friendly with such talk. It amazes me how many of my white friends just don't see it. And, if I bring up the topic with any of the Black inmates, I know there is an immediate connection between us on the subject. It's just part of the way things are here in South Dakota.

Halfway through my summer Camp experience, I expect to get closer to more inmates this second half of my stay than I have in my first half. The challenge I face is not to be looking at my out date and missing what I can be doing with the remaining time I have here in Club Fed Yankton.