

TRUTH,  
JUSTICE,  
AND THE  
**AMERICAN**  
WAY

The US ranks far behind many nations in prison reform. Perhaps change starts with just a bit of compassion. STAT!

by Skye Moody

Novelist, essayist, photographer and world traveler



*“Before you embark on  
a journey of revenge,  
dig two graves.”*

— Confucius

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Ever been to prison? I have, many times, seated among a group of male lifers, murderers mostly, in a maximum-security room at Leavenworth Penitentiary in Washington State. All male except me, the only female in the room. The lifers were unshackled, free of handcuffs, and each held a powerful weapon in their hands. That weapon was a pencil.

For several weeks, I visited Leavenworth’s lifers as part of a project started by a group of writers aiming to humanize the prison experience just a little. Convincing state prison authorities to permit the trial project took time and lots of documentation of similar projects carried out in prisons in Norway and other countries with advanced criminal justice systems. Finally, we got the green light.

#### **Escalating Violence in the Prison System**

Despite the United States being the world’s most democratic society,

with a free press and high scores for a corruption-free judicial system, U.S. correctional facilities rank far behind many countries in prison reform. Today, the U.S. prison system ranks among the world’s harshest, most violent, and least successful in rehabilitating its populations. Recidivism in the U.S. prison system is among the highest in the world. (Alper et al., 2018)

Since violence breeds more violence, our prisons create a life-threatening environment every single day of every convict’s life, whether or not they are model prisoners or innocent of the crimes a judge or jury ruled they’d committed. Inmate fights, drug smuggling, inmates killing other inmates, gang violence, rape, a guard’s sadism are just some examples of what prisoners endure in U.S. correctional facilities. Survival becomes the number-one objective for inmates locked up behind bars in crowded

cells or solitary confinement, lacking sufficient fresh air and sunshine and enduring degrading living conditions. These conditions fuel the frequent violence among inmates.

Progress, though, is being achieved in some corners. In October 2018, outgoing California Governor Jerry Brown commuted the sentence of Earlonne Woods, who spent 20 years of a 31-years-to-life sentence for an armed robbery he was involved in during his 20s. Woods was released at the age of 47; Governor Brown found that 20-plus years of internment inside the notoriously violent and hostile environs of San Quentin State Prison was more than enough time to serve for armed robbery.

A year earlier, in 2017, with the encouragement of prison volunteer worker Nigel Poor, Woods started a podcast called *Ear Hustle* in which as an inmate he talked to the outside world about living conditions inside

San Quentin. *The New York Times* and *NPR* picked up on *Ear Hustle*, and today it ranks among the nation’s award-winning online podcasts.

“What we did was humanize [prisoners] just by telling their stories,” says Poor. “Once you commit your crime, people think that’s what it is, but individuals change. They don’t stay the same people that they were when they committed their crime. They grow up — literally.” (Ruiz-Grossman, 2018)

Sadly, the current U.S. prison system fails to turn out many model prisoners like Earlonne Woods. In a 2014 study of recidivism in U.S. prisons, the National Institute of Justice found that within five years of release about 77%, or three-quarters, of released prisoners were rearrested. Of those, 56%, or more than half, were rearrested before the end of their first year on the outside. (NIJ data, 2014)

Conversely, Norway sits at the top of the world’s rehabilitation successes, with a recidivism rate of around 20%. Norway also enjoys low levels of crime compared to the U.S., according to the International Bureau of Diplomatic Security. The majority of crimes in Norway are thefts; violent crimes are mostly confined to the international epidemics of drug trafficking and gang wars.

A popular misconception held globally is that immigrants are all criminals. What makes Norway, with its high population of foreign immigrants, so much more successful in reducing national crime rates? Simply, Norway, like other countries with very low crime rates, has adopted a concept known as “restorative justice,” which aims to repair the harm caused by crime: Rather than punish people, restorative justice focuses on rehabilitating prisoners.

Norway’s Halden Prison is a 75-acre facility, maintaining as much resemblance to living on the outside as possible. There are no bars on windows; the kitchen facility accessed by prisoners is fully equipped, including knives and other sharp objects. A recording studio and musical instruments are available for inmates’ use. Friendship is encouraged between guards and prisoners. Norway’s philosophy is removing people’s freedom is enough of a punishment.

#### **Revenge and the Desire to Punish**

Anthropologists can demonstrate that even before humans evolved into a culture bearing upright walking species, the lust for revenge existed. Many animals, including chimps, employ food as bribes to acquire friendships. And upon being robbed of their bananas, they retaliate. What if the potential friend chimp, being offered a banana, recalls a past insult



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from the banana briber, and in revenge for the past insult absconds with all the bananas? Retaliation has been practiced for millennia. But how, even among more advanced Homo sapiens, did revenge and justice become synonymous?

From an evolutionary perspective, revenge grew out of a "... motivation to avoid being exploited by others. ... The easiest way to prevent exploitation is to hit back, or simply avoid the exploiter. ... The urge to retaliate is very deeply rooted in evolutionary history." (Lopez, 2015)

Acts of revenge are well documented throughout evolutionary history, and among humans, ancient, often illogical, rules are frequently invoked to justify retaliation. We've all grown up hearing Hammurabi's Code, which dictates: "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

As human society evolved, with incrementally fairer laws and more humanitarian practices, some disciplinary practices also evolved, including among advanced societies, trading punishment

for the more successful treatment of rehabilitation. Sadly, many societies cling to Hammurabi's ancient "eye for an eye" style of punishment. Today in the U.S., where the death penalty is still legal in 30 states, the ancient "eye for an eye" decree still largely rules; meanwhile North European nations, where capital punishment has been abolished, consistently rank at the top of the most-effective correctional systems. Rehabilitation, not revenge, is their overriding philosophy. Due punishment for crimes committed is just and mandated, yet revenge plays no role in these judicial systems.

#### **Justice, Forgiveness and the Mandela Solution**

The psychologist Leon F. Seltzer, Ph.D., has defined the differences between revenge and justice. Revenge, he believes, is predominantly emotional, while justice is primarily rational. Revenge is personal, while justice is impersonal. Ultimately, revenge is about vindictiveness and leads to cyclical response, while justice is about

vindication, restoring balance and finding closure. (Seltzer, 2014)

Importantly, true justice holds the aggressor accountable for their actions while giving the victim a sense of closure and finality. When justice is served, it gives the victim some sense of relief that the perpetrator was handled according to the rule of law, not emotions. Few would suggest that criminals don't deserve to be incarcerated for their crimes. Prisons do serve an important function in our criminal justice system. Yet we err on the side on revenge if we allow inhumane conditions to fester for all in a system designed to dispense appropriate punishment individually.

When Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990 after more than 27 years in solitary confinement (and despite his own brief dalliance with armed conflict, which he later condemned), he was elected President of South Africa. During his time in office, Mandela's National Unity Party established

**Truth, Justice:** *Continued on page 43*

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**Leveling Hills:** *Continued from page 40*

Baptist minister, the Southern Baptist Church stopped ordaining women. She faced racism seeking ordination in the Presbyterian Church, and then in finding placement.

“My choice in life is not to be a permanent victim,” she told me. “My choice is to take what has happened to me and transform it for the good to help others. I know that our human experiences are so similar, that there are so many who want to breathe freely without a boot on their neck. My life’s purpose is to work so that people can be free to breathe.”

A great injustice perpetrated today is that oppressed people’s plight is too often not believed, according to Brown. “We’re not listening to Muslim women who are afraid to wear hijabs in public in the midst of Islamophobia. Antisemitism, some say, isn’t real because Jews are doing well in this country. And if you’re homeless, it was your bad planning and drug addiction that put you there.”

She contends we need to believe each other first before the social distance can be closed. And it’s not always easy. A white female congregant in her 90s asked to meet with Brown three days before her death.

“You think I don’t like you,” the woman said. “It’s not that I don’t like you. I like a lot of things about you. I

just want to make clear that many of us don’t have any experience of being led by a black woman.”

Her honesty was deeply meaningful and affirmed Brown’s ministry at Plymouth. Brown sees the opportunities for black and white Americans to come together by doing the work of real introspection and by honoring and believing the stories of those who are on the bottom. To do this successfully, we need to understand the true nature of intersectionality, that there are people who are oppressed in not just one way, but in many different ways that converge to keep them down.

For Brown, closing the distance can start by listening to one another as spiritual practice and by taking classes and adding to our reading lists authors and thinkers who don’t look like us and who don’t identify the way we do. In her words, “By discerning who we are and by making choices about who we will be, we are making manifest a more just world.”

The scripture she often quotes is Isaiah 40, which speaks of leveling the hills and raising the valleys. Her hope for America is a greater understanding that there has to be forward motion — and while it may look different for whites,

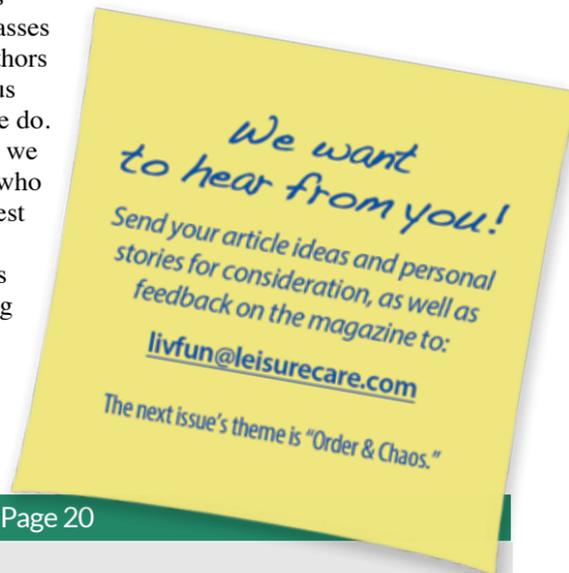
blacks and other ethnicities, this motion has the possibility of bringing justice closer for all. ♦

**Read more:**

The Rev. Doctor Kelle Brown serves as lead pastor at Plymouth Church United Church of Christ. Learn more about the church and its ministry at: [www.plymouthchurchseattle.org](http://www.plymouthchurchseattle.org).

Learn more about the work of The Poor People’s Campaign at: [www.poorpeoplescampaign.org](http://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org).

Read more about the life and work of Fannie Lou Hamer at: [www.womenshistory.org](http://www.womenshistory.org). For more information about Rev. Dr. Flora Wilson Bridges, check out her book *Resurrection Song* at [books.google.com](http://books.google.com).



**BRAIN GAMES ANSWERS / From Page 20**

**Answers to Crossword Puzzle**

T	H	E	S	A	L	T	T	I	L	A	K
R	O	D	A	B	O	U	T	A	B	E	L
A	M	E	R	I	C	A	N	A	T	I	T
P	E	N	A	L	F	I	R	S	T	D	U
R	E	F	S	T	Y	E	P	E	A		
B	O	R	E	D	O	M	N	R	A		
P	R	E	C	A	L	L	O	S	I	T	Y
M	E	E	T	A	L	I	E	N	G	O	A
O	F	S	O	C	I	E	T	Y	G	R	L
E	S	C	S	M	E	L	T	E	D		
C	P	A	P	I	C	A	S	R	I		
H	O	N	O	R	A	R	I	A	A	S	T
A	L	O	N	E	I	S	J	U	S	T	I
M	A	D	L	Y	B	L	A	S	E	N	O
P	R	E	Y	S	E	R	A	S	T	N	T

**Answers to Sudoku**

6	8	3	9	7	2	4	5	1
2	4	5	1	6	3	9	8	7
9	7	1	8	4	5	2	3	6
8	6	9	4	3	7	1	2	5
1	2	4	6	5	9	8	7	3
5	3	7	2	8	1	6	9	4
3	9	6	5	2	4	7	1	8
7	1	8	3	9	6	5	4	2
4	5	2	7	1	8	3	6	9



NEW YORK - JUNE 21: Unidentified child in front of the Nelson Mandela mural in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn on June 21, 2014

**Truth, Justice:** *Continued from page 18*

South Africa’s “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” to address the injustices perpetrated by both sides during the violent civil war to end apartheid. The Commission allowed a safe environment for perpetrators of hatred and violence on both sides of the apartheid struggle to step up before the public, truthfully admit their crimes, offer atonement, and receive a just form of earning the public’s forgiveness, without hatred, revenge, incarceration, or the threat of capital punishment; the goal was to accomplish both forgiveness for the individual and justice for society in general.

Imagine how Earlonne Woods felt after enduring 20 years in a U.S. prison when he reunited with his

mother for the first time in more than two decades. Imagine how Nigel Poor felt when her devotion to humanizing incarcerated offenders (some innocent of the crime they were found guilty of) paid off. Imagine how you would feel volunteering your time and talents inside a U.S. penitentiary, rekindling the light of human compassion in men and women who may have lost all hope of being treated as a human being, who, too often, are treated worse than animals in a zoo. Your reward? Witnessing a spark of gratitude, even hope, in the eye of a lifer as you, a stranger from the outside, befriend him or her, offer to teach a craft, or take time to listen passionately to an inmate’s story,

perhaps even offering hope that soon the nation’s penal system will follow other advanced countries’ examples by humanizing the treatment of convicted offenders.

I wonder, if by rising up from our easy chairs and volunteering — say, an hour a week at a local prison facility — we each could make small but profound improvements in the lives of incarcerated human beings and a lasting improvement in our antiquated prison system and the justice it can, with positive changes, deliver to the incarcerated, the victim, and society in general.

Listen to Earlonne Wood’s podcasts of life inside prison at [www.earhustlesq.com](http://www.earhustlesq.com). ♦

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