"A STORY OF COURAGE AND BOUNDLESS COMPASSION."—STEPHEN REID

HUMAN ON THE INSIDE

UNLOCKING THE TRUTH ABOUT CANADA'S PRISONS

GARY GARRISON

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This book is dedicated to the staff and volunteers of Mennonite Central Committee Alberta and its affiliates, MCC Canada and MCC USA.

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

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cultural events, dancing, or walking in the park instead of going into prisons. I honour you for your choice to befriend prisoners you had never met, even though you might never know what impact your visits had on the prisoners.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AVP — Alternatives to Violence Project
COSA — Circles of Support and Accountability
CSC — Correctional Service of Canada (also referred to as Corrections Canada)
D&S — Detention and Segregation, the part of a prison where prisoners are kept in isolation from others, either for punishment or for their own protection; sometimes referred to by people outside the system as solitary confinement
FASD — Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
M2W2 — Man-to-Man, Woman-to-Woman; a prison visitation program, operated in Alberta by the Mennonite Central Committee
MCC — Mennonite Central Committee
P2P — Person-to-Person, a prison visitation program in Saskatchewan, operated by MCC Saskatchewan
Pop — General population, all of the prisoners in a prison except for those in Detention and Segregation, or Protective Custody
SHU — Special Handling Unit or super max unit, one security level higher than a max
TRU — Transfer and Release Unit (at the Max, this refers to Protective Custody units, since the Max has had no bona fide Transfer and Release Unit for many years)

INTRODUCTION

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood.
Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.
—Marie Curie

C stumbles across the scene of an accident: a crumpled van, blood, and bodies strewn across the highway. C has basic first aid, but he's frozen and helpless in the middle of all the twisted metal, gore, screams, and agony. His best friend dies in his arms. Two other friends are dead too. Five others he knows lie there with broken necks, arms, and legs. For a week C drinks to blot out the memory. He doesn't even know he's killed somebody until the police come to arrest him.

K's parents are always drunk. K sees them throw chairs, tables, bottles, and each other through the windows of their house so often he thinks that's how relationships work. When he's eight, he sees his aunt back a car over his mother in the driveway. He remembers watching her shift into drive and run over his mother again to make sure she's dead.

S's mother is a drug addict. He's beaten and sexually assaulted by his mother's boyfriends. Starting at age seven, he frequently runs away from home, lives on the street, and parties with older friends. He's in and out of the young offenders' centre and group homes. Once he's out of elementary school, he does break and

enters and steals cars to support himself and to buy drugs and booze. After he gets his first federal sentence, he slashes his arms, not to kill himself but for the high the pain gives him.

H holds off taking drugs until grade nine, despite pressure from friends. Once he's into the drug scene, he experiments with LSD when his depression becomes extreme. He kills his sister instead of himself simply because she happens to be there.

P's father teaches him how to mainline heroin at age six. He assaults another boy at school with a stick, and his mother turns him over to a group home. He holds the group home staff hostage at knifepoint for three hours. His principal demand is for a gun so he can shoot himself. P is in and out of prisons, group homes, and psychiatric hospitals for sixteen years, from the age of ten.

Prisoners' stories like these are not usually part of the public debate about crime, punishment, justice, and public safety. They rarely get told in newspapers or on television. Politicians who hear stories like these are careful about what they say because their opponents will twist their words to make it look like they're on the side of murderers and pedophiles. Nothing, it seems, is a more effective vote-getter these days than fear: of terrorism, public debt, taxes, poverty, cancer, death, crime, criminals, and a host of other things.

When I visited prisoners in Edmonton Institution (the Max) and Bowden Institution, I met many people who wondered why people like me were taking the prisoners' side—so they claimed—instead of the victims' side. Sometimes prison staff obstructed prison visitors like me for supporting murderers, rapists, pedophiles, and drug dealers. They saw the brutality of the crimes and put roadblocks between us and the prisoners. They would decline to circulate official memos that authorized our visits. They'd violate the system's rules about testing us for traces of drugs on our clothing and delay us at the front gate or even turn us away. They'd give prisoners too little time to gather for their walk to the visiting room and not let them come when they weren't fast enough. Sometimes they'd simply decline to notify the prisoners we were on site waiting for them.

The fact is, though, that it's not a simple either/or choice to support criminals or victims. It's not always even a clear judgment that the worst offenders are only offenders and not victims themselves. In the abbreviated stories of prisoners C, K, S, H, and P, the offenders were abused as children or suffered from a mental illness or post-traumatic stress. I say this not to excuse their crimes but to recognize that these men are human beings who had to deal with circumstances far more difficult than most of us have known. In fact, the prisoners I worked with—with few exceptions—have accepted personal responsibility for their crimes and for the irreparable damage they caused. They have deliberately chosen not to blame somebody else for what they did.

The first priority of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC, and also referred to throughout this book as Corrections Canada) is the "Safe transition to and management of eligible offenders in the community."[1] The agency officially recognizes that prisoners can only be safely reintegrated into the community if individuals and groups from the community are involved in the process. The main purpose of this book is to show the larger community how that looks to the people who get involved, why they do it, and how we all benefit by having less fear and more understanding and, consequently, greater safety and security.

A key part of the con code in prison is that the guards and the staff are the enemy. The guards have a similar, unwritten code of conduct. Both groups protect their own even in extreme cases, even if it means letting someone get away with murder. Nevertheless, every prisoner and every guard is a human being, and that fact sometimes supersedes both these codes. I've even seen people on both sides of the divide shed tears for people on the other side. As a person with a community agency, I support both groups. I'm also on the side of the police, the chaplains, the native Elders, the victims, and all the potential future victims in the community. A longtime staff person I worked with at the Max told me it was wrong

1 www.csc-scc.gc.ca/about-us/006-0002-eng.shtml

to have the prison eleven kilometres away from where city people lived. He said the prison belongs downtown where everybody can see it and learn that the guards, staff, management, and even the prisoners are still part of the community, that they belong to us and we to them.

This is not an academic criminology textbook. It does not attempt to be comprehensive; for example, the work of chaplains, Elders, psychologists, judges, lawyers, and journalists is only mentioned in passing. It presents stories of prisoners' lives and circumstances in order to un-demonize them so readers can understand how much people outside prison have in common with people inside. It offers readers the opportunity to visit a prison vicariously and to participate in an Alternatives to Violence workshop. It includes personal stories of victims, staff, volunteers, and community agencies. These stories show that we are all human persons with a role in supporting each other and making our communities stronger and our streets and homes safer. The first step is to engage with others' stories "to understand more, so that we may fear less."

Fear has built walls, iron gates, barbed-wire fences, and armies of guards, police, and prosecutors to protect us. We agree as a society that these things are necessary, but do the walls have to be so high that they cut us off completely from prisoners who need contact with us if we are to be safe when they get out? Do the walls have to be so thick we cannot learn from other people some vital truths about ourselves? From a security perspective, the best way to make a building safe is to lock it down completely and let nobody in or out. It's also safer to stay at home than to go out. Safest of all is to stay in bed all day. But is that the kind of safety we want for ourselves and our communities?

CHAPTER 1 //

THE PRISON BREAK-IN

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear
— William Blake, "London"

I lived with my family in a silo in Edmonton's Mill Woods subdivision from 1978 to 2002. Our home was a chocolate-brown, aluminum-sided, suburban bi-level, but it was still a silo. We attended St. Theresa's Roman Catholic Church, our kids attended Catholic schools, and we rarely crossed paths with non-Catholics whose kids attended public schools. We were separated from the rest of Edmonton by industrial and commercial districts and a freeway. Mill Woods was all middle class and working class people, very much like us. A silo within a silo within a silo.

I worked at the Alberta Legislature as editor of *Hansard*, the official report of the Assembly's debates. That was another silo. I worked under the Speaker, whose department was part of the public service but not part of "the government," which was run by the majority party in the House. Our department—the Legislative Assembly Office—served all the parties and had rules unique to us, like exclusion from the public service union, even though we

were clearly public servants. The public service is a silo too. Public servants get benefits, pension plans, and job security unheard of in the private sector; they also work in a tightly controlled, hierarchical, political environment.

I call these things silos, but they were and are a lot like prisons. Even some of the language we used during my time in the public service was like prison lingo. People approaching retirement—even if it was ten years away—would talk about how many years, months, and days they had left to serve before they were free. When positions were cut and people were laid off, they usually got a generous payout, which was called "the golden handshake." People like me had well-paying jobs we'd been in a long time, but if we got tired of them or wanted to change careers, we had little hope of moving to another job with similar pay somewhere else. We called our situation "the golden handcuffs."

In June 2000, I burned out. For a while I couldn't even read a book or stand up for more than fifteen minutes at a stretch, and I napped all the time. When I regained some of my strength, I felt empty and didn't know what to do with my life. A counsellor suggested I try to meet people who were unlike me. He said that would open my eyes to a different world and help me see myself in a different light. So, in September 2001, I made my first trip to Edmonton Institution (the Max) and visited a man serving a life sentence for murder. I broke into the Max to get out of my own prisons.

In July 2002, I became the coordinator of the M2W2[2] prison visitation program I'd been volunteering for. My job was to pair prisoners with volunteers who came in to visit once a month. I talked to prisoners on their units and in the metalworking shop at the Max, where they could learn useful skills like powder coating and

2 M2W2 sounds like R2D2, George Lucas's cute little robot from Star Wars, but it's an abbreviation for "man to man, woman to woman." The name states the essential principle that this prison visitation program is simply—and profoundly—a matter of one person reaching out to meet another person. The comparable program in Saskatchewan is called Person to Person and is commonly abbreviated as P2P.

welding. I met them in the prison school, the Aboriginal cultural centre, the chapel, the gym, and even in the sweat lodge, where we all wore only gym shorts and towels. My job was to find prisoners who would volunteer to come on our visiting night and meet with a person from the outside.

M2W2 is a program of the Mennonite Central Committee that began in Alberta over twenty-five years ago. Its main purpose is to provide personal contact for prisoners with somebody who's part of the larger community. The volunteers come into the prison on the second Friday of every month, listen to prisoners, and informally mentor them, one-on-one. Visitors model for them how to live a normal life, something many of them have never seen.

To recruit prisoners and maintain the program's visibility at the Max, I went there every Tuesday. I nearly always started my day off in the chapel by having lunch with one or both chaplains. One of those Tuesdays about two years into my doing this work is particularly memorable.

The Roman Catholic chaplain, Sr. Elizabeth Coulombe, invites me to share my life story with a group of prisoners at an evening chapel service. I agree to come, hoping I'll find more prisoners to join the program.

"Some of you know me," I tell the ten men sitting in a circle of orange, hard plastic chairs. "I coordinate the M2W2 prison visitation program. What you may not know about me is how I ended up here. By 'here' I don't only mean 'in this prison.' I mean in Canada, in Edmonton at the Max, as coordinator of M2W2."

"I just realized a funny thing about my being in here," I continue. My heart starts pounding so loudly I can hear it. Suddenly, I'm afraid that if I tell them about me, they'll think I'm a wimp. Once word gets around, I could lose the trust I've built with prisoners throughout the Max these last two years. If a new prisoner—a "fish" in prison lingo—came in with a history like mine, he'd be

a target for fists, kicks, and even knives ("shivs"). In the sixties and seventies men like me were savaged in the U.S. media and shunned by the community. My own father said he was ashamed of me for leaving the United States and coming to Canada. I'd worked at a newspaper in Toronto where a pressman could scarcely contain his rage at my "cowardice." His face turned fire-engine red whenever we crossed paths. I marvel now that he didn't wind up and punch me in the nose.

But it's too late to back out now. I take a deep breath and forge ahead. "If I hadn't come to Canada in 1970," I say, "I would've gone to prison for dodging the draft. That was the height of the Vietnam War. I had just graduated from Saint Louis University. I grew up in Kansas City and Pueblo, Colorado, but I was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma."

"So you're an Okie from Muskogee, like in the song?" Somebody laughs.

"Yeah. That's me," I smile. "Unlike the Okie in the song, I did grow my hair long. I had a lot more then, and it was curly. People told me I had a pretty fair Afro for a white guy." More chuckles.

"The point I want to make is that I came to Canada because my own country threatened me with prison if I didn't join the army and kill people. And here I am at the Max visiting you guys." I look around at their faces. I know that a few of them are in on life sentences because they took another person's life. I see a few headshakes and grimaces, but most of them are as still as bronze statues. I ask them, "What would you think about being put in prison for *not* killing somebody?"

"Far out!" somebody says.

"I woulda gone," says another.

"Yeah, man. It woulda been fun. And the travel!"

"I didn't come here to talk politics," I say. "But politics are part of life wherever you go. Some of you probably think you're in here for political reasons, that you didn't get justice because you couldn't afford a good lawyer, because you're part of a racial minority, or you aren't as educated as the police, the lawyers, the judges, and the prison guards you have to deal with. There's a lot of truth in that."

"I came to talk about where I came from. I left behind all my friends and relatives in 1970 to protest the Vietnam War. I was alone except for the woman I married. We stood together against the killing. After we raised three children to adulthood, in 2002 we broke up. I realized she wasn't the person I thought I married. Maybe she had similar thoughts about me. By that time we couldn't even talk to each other. Now all three of my adult children are gone, and I'm the only one of the family left in Edmonton." Then I tell them how I found the strength to move forward and develop a new life for myself. After I've said my piece, we have an informal discussion over coffee and cookies, and then the guards come to escort the prisoners back to their units.

When I return to the Max the next Tuesday, Sister Elizabeth and I talk about the chapel service. She tells me that a day or two afterwards, many of the same men came back to the chapel. One of them opened up about his life. She says that telling his story helped him understand himself better, gave him hope for the future, and convinced him he has the power to determine his own destiny. Sister Elizabeth thanks me for leading the way. She plans to encourage more prisoners to tell their life stories too.

That gets me thinking. I've just read Studs Terkel's *The Good War* and *Working*, landmark oral histories about World War II and life in various workplaces, and I see in my twenty-two years' experience of editing *Hansard* at the Alberta Legislature a talent for translating oral speech into written text. "Maybe I could interview some prisoners," I say, "and we could make a book out of it."

When Sister Elizabeth and I first draft plans for the book, we decide on a simple, three-part formula for prisoner interviews: (1) Where do you come from? (family background, life before prison); (2) What is prison life like for you?; and (3) What are your hopes for the future, and what will you do to keep out of trouble when you get out? We agree that anonymity is essential, that I will include no prisoner's name in the book, that I'll edit out all place references. We want these to be real stories, and we want the prisoners to feel free to talk without fear of retribution or ridicule.

The prisoners' life stories would be just the start. The book would give prisoners a chance to tell their stories and to be heard; it also would shine a light inside the prison and let readers face their fears of crime, of prisoners, and of parts of themselves they don't want to acknowledge. Our proposal appeals to the higher-ups in the prison because they want to do what they can to help prisoners improve themselves and because they know that, ultimately, the community is safer when people on the outside have a better understanding of people on the inside. Our proposal fits into the system's interest in the restorative justice model, which refocuses the traditional emphasis on punishment and security as part of the effort to heal the damage crime does to individuals and the community.

So I get permission to come in with a tape recorder. I spend between sixty and ninety minutes with each prisoner who agrees to an interview. I invite thirty prisoners to participate, I get twelve prisoners' oral histories, and I transcribe and edit them all. I preserve each prisoner's speaking style, as I had so many MLAs' speeches in *Hansard*. I share the transcripts with my supervisor, with coworkers, with the prisoners involved. As editor of *Hansard*, I published about sixty large volumes comprised of many thousands of pages of MLAs' speeches; what I've got now is a text that's as full of repetition and posturing and as unengaging as *Hansard* ever was. Why would anybody publish it? Why would anybody read it? The journey from editor to author looks like a mile-high Grand Canyon wall in front of me. I'm afraid I'll never make it to the top. I'm low on energy, still recovering from my family breakup and from my burnout at the Legislature two years before that. So I set the project aside.

That was ten years ago. The book Sister Elizabeth and I had in mind is very different from the book you have in your hand now. I started this project thinking I would simply be the facilitator in a process of prisoners opening up about themselves, and then other prisoners who read those first stories would open up too. It was going to be a story avalanche, and the sound of my voice would