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THE CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION AS A  
REHABILITATION CENTER — A  
FORMER INMATE'S VIEW

VICTOR TAYLOR†

**F**IRST, I would like to say, "Thank God for *Johnson v. Avery*."<sup>1</sup>

As far as I am concerned, in reference to Mr. Brierley's remarks, the problems of prisons have nothing whatever to do with the jailhouse lawyer. In fact, if it were not for jailhouse lawyers, many people who do not even belong in prison would never have gotten out. This goes for "lifers" as well as other long-term prisoners.

I was rather afraid that everyone here today would essentially agree, and I think that is what is about to happen — with the exception of Mr. Brierley who hasn't addressed himself to the problems of the prisons at all. Everyone here agrees that there are problems in the prisons and that there are no constitutional rights afforded prisoners. We agree what those constitutional rights should be and where the responsibility lies for implementation. My question is, "Why haven't they been implemented?"

There is an outcry about recidivism in various communities. At the same time, we are made aware that people are treated like animals. That, it seems to me, is the current function of prison: to turn people into animals and to have these people return.

Again, I do not know whose responsibility it is to implement these rights. I only know that these are rights you would want for yourself. I do not know why prisoners can't also enjoy them.

Since leaving prison, I have followed the course that I chose while I was an inmate. It would be naive to say that I was just an average prisoner or an average person coming out of prison. I realize that in many respects I am somewhat of an exception. To use Mr. Rabinowitz' words, my personal development occurred "in spite of what happened to me in prison," and not because of what they did for me, nor because of anything they might have made available to me. It was because of what they did *not* make available and because I was fortunate enough to recognize that prison life is a terrible circle — one from which it is hard to break out. I was touched by what I saw happening to other people and by what happened to me personally. I saw the institutional roadblocks to better educational

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1. 393 U.S. 483 (1969).

facilities and realized the contradiction which exists in being sent to a penitentiary called a "correctional institution" which does nothing whatever for the individual offender.

Prisons do not, in fact, correct. The authorities even go so far as to punish you for attempting to correct yourself. There is talk now of many changes in the prison system — changes now being worked on, or changes that are contemplated for the future. I can speak better about the four and a half years that I was there. There were no educational facilities, and if you attempted self-education, you were systematically punished. I speak of state correctional institutions — Graterford specifically — because this is where I did my time. I do not know what will develop with these new rules and I do not understand what the problems of implementation of rights are. I do not know that any rights were ever attempted to be implemented. If there are problems that will result from implementing rights, they are problems that can be dealt with by all the "dynamite" minds that we have in Pennsylvania — all those "dynamite" minds in the penal system. They have ingenious ways of punishing people in the most animalistic fashion. I think they can turn their talents around to implement rights for prisoners. I fear, unfortunately, that until that time, you can expect — you can depend on — higher rates of recidivism. You can depend on people being released and taking the route that Jojo Bowen took some weeks ago; he was released from prison and allegedly murdered a policeman.

I was in Graterford with Jojo Bowen, and I know something about the treatment he received there from the prison personnel. It is my opinion that his alleged act after being released was, if true in fact, the result of the treatment he received while he was at Graterford. He was that type of person who reacted in a fashion which gave the officials the chance to act the way they wanted to act with him; that is, sadistically. There are many prisoners, such as myself, who took the "low road" and did not react in a similar way. Possibly that is why *I* am not in prison for murder, or possibly that is why I am not dead. I am sitting here today because my better judgment led me to necessary compromises — compromises which will likely haunt me for the rest of my life.

Your tax dollars are not correcting people and are not rehabilitating people. They are not doing anything. I think that one of the major problems in prisons today is that prisoners are treated like slaves. There is a system of slave labor in which the state makes money from the prisoners' work, but refuses to pay these prisoners accordingly. My guess is that this is the same in our society generally.

Nobody is paid what they are worth or what their work is worth. Yet, this is much easier to do in a prison environment — one characterized as a “controlled environment.” Nevertheless, everyone turns his head away, and even the United States Constitution condones this exploitation of the prison populace.

We talk at length about the implementation of rights for prisoners and the problems that this implementation would cause. I do not know that the problems could be any worse — what could be worse than mental and spiritual evisceration. If you were to look around the prison walls, you would see the same faces years after year. Some inmates are fortunate enough to be released only to return again and again. For the most part, I think that recidivism is a result of what happens to people behind prison walls. In addition, there appears to exist a relation between what tax dollars are *not* doing and the extremely high recidivist rate. This is due in large part to the failure of the taxpayer to “keep an eye” on his tax dollars — dollars currently sponsoring increased crime. The taxpayer “gets what he pays for” by his lack of concern.

In December of 1969, at Graterford, we went on a general food strike. The prisoners agreed that there would be no violence, no threats of violence and no weapons. There would be nothing but passive protest. We were asking for — not demanding — access to better educational facilities and cleaner eating utensils, or at least satisfactory cleaning equipment which would help retard the spread of disease. Prior to the food strike, a few inmates were infected by jaundice. We felt that this was caused by greasy trays. The trays that we were made to eat from were not cleaned by machine, but only by hand at a water temperature not hot enough to insure proper disinfection. We went on a general food strike, missing only the afternoon meal. At the evening meal, there were some 50 to 75 state troopers in the institution, armed for combat. This is the kind of treatment that you get in prison. This is how those in positions of power respond to the powerless. This is how your tax dollars are spent in answering the legitimate grievances of prisoners.

Joined with this type of treatment is the fact that there is no correction and no rehabilitation. I do not know where the answer lies. I do not know whose responsibility it is to straighten these things out. If I knew, I would tell you. I do think, however, that this is the ultimate responsibility of everyone here. I disagree with Mr. Crawford and think that this responsibility rests not only upon the legislature but upon the courts as well. The courts sentence us to prison for rehabilitation and in many cases this specific reference to

rehabilitation is an intrinsic part of the sentence itself. Theoretically, one is sentenced to be *rehabilitated* and to be *corrected*. In practice, however, this just does not happen. I was hoping that Mr. Brierley would address himself more specifically to the types of problems which I have discussed, instead of attributing many of the ills to "writ writers." I don't think that "writ writing" is the real problem in prisons. In my view, part of the problem emanates from wardens who become intoxicated with their power over the prisoners and who too often forget that they are public servants.

Again, there is a problem of slave labor and of brutality by guards. Although inmates may many times be the victims of their own cruelty to one another, I would say that a large part of this problem is due to the overall prison environment. This environment is violent. The prisoners, however, are unable to retaliate on guards and officials, so they vent their frustrations on one another. I do not feel that they should have to take the entire blame for this sort of conduct. Murder, mayhem, sodomy, assault — these are the norm in an abnormal environment. Reason never has, and never will, rest its weary bones in a "controlled environment." The "law of the jungle" prevails.

It appears to me that we are all in agreement on what should be done and on what now is not being done. I am concerned with how long it is going to take to do these things. People are dying every day in the penitentiaries and yet there is no explanation given. I think that for the most part, you pay a warden to do a certain job, and you complacently assume he is doing that job. When it comes to the point of an inmate filing a petition or making some other sort of formal or informal grievance, it becomes a question of credibility: the inmate's word against the warden's. Probably, one is more prone to believe the warden because he is being paid to do the job. The inmate's word, on the other hand, is "bad" simply because he is an inmate. There are at the present time a number of suits pending in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania which concern the type of grievances that prisoners have in the state prisons, at Graterford specifically. In addition to those problems discussed here today, it would seem to me to be very easy to determine what other problems exist in the prison system simply by checking the court dockets.

I fear that unless something can be drafted here today and unless somebody says that we are going to take some direct action, then this seminar will be useless. This seminar means nothing to the approximately 6,200 people in State correctional institutions in Penn-

sylvania. It means nothing at all to the nearly 4,000 people in county prisons across the state. A "bunch" of people are here with the press to listen and to speak in cross discussion, but this too means nothing to those in prison. Somebody may die tomorrow — unexplained. I am not satisfied with the explanation that we have on Philip Crawley's death.<sup>2</sup> The only explanation that we have is the explanation of the warden, or perhaps a guard. If we want to be serious about what is happening in prisons, then why don't we have some prisoners here today? That is how you find out what is going on. I can tell you what happened in the four and a half years that I was in prison, but I cannot tell you what happened yesterday. I cannot tell you what happened when Philip Crawley died. I am sure that if you had prisoners here today, who are presently confined, then we could hear two sides of the story, and leave it up to somebody else to determine what really happened — that is, of course, if anyone is *interested* in knowing.

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2. Early in 1971, Philip Anthony Crawley, III, was killed in the State Correctional Institution at Pittsburgh. Crawley was allegedly knifed to death by a fellow prisoner. Victor Taylor was personally acquainted with Crawley, having known him since childhood, and of him stated: "Of all that Crawley was or might have been, he was not a violent man."