



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Dead men waiting

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment April 20, 2010

I've returned from my weekend visit at Florida's death row--9:00 am to 3:00 pm last Saturday and Sunday, not counting the time devoted to the elaborate system for identification and verification. My journey came at the invitation of one death row resident who had been convicted in 1991 of three counts of murder. His protracted legal battle--retrial upon retrial because of multiple errors of due process--has kept him alive on the row for nearly 20 years.

The visiting room is equipped with an array of steel tables, enough for 26 of the more than 300 death row convicts to entertain guests--some spouses, but mostly girlfriends met through prison letters. The rules permit inmates to greet their loved one with an appropriate show of affection. It was especially touching is to see couples stroll hand-in-hand through the "park." (There isn't really a park, or even an outdoor visiting area. But for some reason unknown to me, the visiting room is officially called "Visitor Park.")

Besides girlfriends (and a few boyfriends), other visitors included various friends and family members. Children passed the time while visiting their dads by playing a variety of games, prominently marked "Death Row," that are stashed in the corner of the room. I doubt the kiddies recognized the irony to some of the options, such as "Clue," "Life," and "Sorry--The Game of Sweet Revenge." The most curious, however, were the decks of playing cards, each with details and a picture of some victim of an unsolved homicide or some missing persons along with the number of the tip line for volunteering information.

With little by way of diversion, everyone spent the day wolfing down various microwavable foods sold at the canteen. Compared with what the inmates are served in their cells, these items represent fine dining. As for me, a rather fussy eater, the only selection I could stomach was microwave macaroni ("micaroni," for short) minus the phony cheese powder.

I also admit to having grown fidgety, confined to that one room for 6 hours--and without even my iPhone. At one point, I actually felt the vibration of an incoming call--a phantom alert, much like the sensations typical after a limb is surgically removed. The guards had amputated my iPhone!

Despite it all, I managed to stay upbeat and enthusiastic. I shouldn't complain about a two 6-hour stays, when my host had been locked up on death row for two decades.

Of course, my host was hardly unique in terms of death row tenure. Another inmate who greeted me by name when I arrived (he recognized me from television because he has little to do besides watching television) has been on the row for 26 years. The inmate at the next table has also surpassed the two decade milestone. And according to Department of Corrections records, several other men have been on the row for over 30 years.

I cannot imagine spending day after day, year after year, decade after decade in solitude. Except for two brief sessions weekly for exercise with others from the block, these men sleep, eat, read, and watch TV alone in their 6 ft. x 9 ft. cells (take a [virtual tour](#)). They "attend" religious services by remote connection. Other than alternate-day trips to the shower stall, they maintain their personal hygiene also in the confines of their three concrete walls and barred facade.

The Pennsylvania Quakers developed the concept of solitary confinement as the basis for America's first penitentiary, which opened in Philadelphia in 1829. Their philosophy, well-meaning though misguided, was that through isolation criminals could reflect, pray, and achieve penitence (thus, the word "penitentiary"). After several decades and countless suicides, the so-called "separate system" was eclipsed by institutions that allowed inmates to congregate for meals and work, even though supposedly in silence. Human beings are not meant for long-term social isolation.

Unlike the historic Philadelphia prison, death row inmates do have televisions, radios, books and other simple pleasures. But for the most part, isolation is a way of life until their day of death. Moreover, unlike my host and a few dozen others who are lucky to have weekly or occasional visitors, most men on the row have long ago been forsaken by friends and family. No wonder that condemned inmates experience such profound mental health problems, often called "death row syndrome."

As a long-term student of capital punishment, I was not surprised by anything I observed at Florida's death row, although I continue to be dismayed. Like many people, I consider state-sponsored executions to be a barbaric practice, a cruel ritual that I've had the displeasure of witnessing. However, in many respects, indeterminate existence in nearly total solitude, waiting for the death sentence to be imposed, is worse. It is as lethal to the spirit as lethal injection is to the body.