

'Life' in prison

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| SCOTLAND |

After almost 14 years of custody, an account of my experiences as a prisoner may produce a broader, yet duller answer than the question 'what is it like in there?' traditionally elicits. It's certainly an enduring question, asked to some degree by everyone from my closest family and friends to absolute strangers. Less enduring though are the many answers I have given over the years, constantly shifting, and subject to time and context. For all the homogeneity and conformity generally associated with the concept of prisons, ultimately, imprisonment is a very personal experience. With that in mind, I acknowledge that this account is the best interpretation I can give of my own experience and what that means to me right now. I also accept that while I may at times make generalisations and look for universalities, I by no means speak for everyone, either here in Scotland, or anywhere else in the world.

In my experience, the response to that very common question is not the retort litany of salacious clichés regarding living conditions, sanitation, gang culture, interpersonal violence and drug abuse most people seem to believe and want confirmed. Nor is it the comfortable, easy 'life' that very same majority, encouraged by the tabloid press and media-savvy politicians looking to harness public outrage, simultaneously assume and deride. Prison is far from the hyped up, caricatured discourse that precedes either construction. Further still from the privileged space of rehabilitation and support the party line of the Scottish Prison Service 'Unlocking Potential, Transforming Lives' now officially claims.

In my experience, what prison really is, is a monument to wasted potential. A trap to wish

your life away. What it really is, is a stage for society's anger and fear. A pantomime of good versus evil. What it really is, is a dumping ground. A waste management system for society's most vulnerable and most dangerous - neither being mutually exclusive. It is a barrier between 'us' and 'them' come manifest. More permeable for some than others. It is a place fundamentally at odds with itself. Care and control. Retribution and rehabilitation. Segregation and reintegration. Responsibilisation and infantilisation.

Whatever I, or you, think prison is, or should be, it remains the most severe punishment we as a free society in the UK can inflict.

For me, now 31, it is also the place where I have spent almost half my life, and, more worryingly, most of the life I can remember. It was 2003 when I first came to prison. I was charged with murder and attempted murder. I was 16 years old. I was alone. And I was terrified. But for what I would eventually come to realise were all the wrong reasons. I was worried about immediate things, like assault and predation. Status and politics. I was worried about using the phone that night. Getting a visit that week. All genuine concerns, though all very much focused on the here and now.

But that's not what prison is - certainly not for me anyway. Prison is a long game. Now, I won't pretend I didn't see violence, or that it didn't come my way a couple of times, but I could say the same thing about my life prior to custody. So eventually, after the worst was faced, and I found my lane, what really got me was the sense that however hard I tried to stay connected to the outside and to who I was, it just kept slipping away.

Little by little, as relationships wore thin and I split from my partner; as letters dried up and phone calls and visits became less regular; until all I was really doing was catching up with some friends here, and other friends there; checking in with family now and then to keep up to speed, I realised that all the things I was scared of, and sure of, didn't really matter anymore. The world I once thought I was central to, kept turning in my absence, and everyone in it moved right on with their lives. I once wrote about long-term imprisonment being like a chance to see how the world would be if I was dead. I reiterate it here as I am yet to find a more appropriate analogy. As all my black and white absolutes faded into pale grey quandaries, I realised I had something far bigger to worry about.

Who am I? Now that all the things I used to define myself by are either gone or disconnected? Where do I go from here?

And that for me, is what really screws most people up. Because they don't go anywhere. They stay right where they were and stretch it so thin that by the end there's nothing left but the performance of a washed-out memory. They don't find ways to grow. To feel a sense of their life going somewhere. They just assimilate into the relentless, stagnant, nothing they're in. It's why drugs are such an attractive prospect in prison. A way to melt the walls away. Turn nowhere into anywhere. To feel just how you used to feel. Vital. Relevant. Real.

Unfortunately, that escape tends to turn into an abyss most can't find their way back from. Aided in no small part by prison policy that effectively criminalises a public health concern like addiction to the extent that some do more time just for using drugs in custody than others do for selling them in bulk on the streets.

What the drugs don't claim, the internal workings, politics and hierarchies will. It's one of the first pieces of advice a seasoned vet will bestow on anyone at the start of a relatively long sentence 'Forget about what's going on out there. Get your head into the jail. Time will fly.' Which, in many ways, isn't wrong. Simply accepting early on what I have just described will eventually happen. Unfortunately, many do this by immersing themselves completely in the very small, narrow world of the prison. Defining themselves by it and nothing else. Desperate to fit in. To feel safe. To be someone. Concerned with being 'one of the troops' a 'real con' with a 'good name in the jail'. All achieved through demonstration of the hyper-masculine, anti-authoritarian, oppositional imperative that prison is geared toward and perpetuates. A basic blueprint for self-destruction. NED's^[1] on Meds. Efficiently and systematically (re)produced by the prison estate. Lucky to get out. Likely to return.

Fortunately, I made the first sensible decision of my life early on in custody, to reject my vices and stay away from drugs; play the game; make the best of every opportunity I could; and get out as soon as possible. I was going to fill my time with 'meaningful pursuits' like educational, vocational and physical training. I was going to enrich myself, and give myself a sense of purpose. I was going to use this time to make my life go somewhere. And with that in mind, I feel it necessary to talk about the relevance, or not, of clichés. For example,

my life up until coming to prison, in retrospect, reads as a very deterministic set of circumstances, that I won't go into here, other than to point out the irony that no-one back then saw this coming. Yet, despite my 'textbook landing' into custody, I went completely the other way. I knew from the second I was there that I was never going to 'fit in', and after almost 14 years, I still don't. I still don't know what it was that clicked at the start either, as, precocious as I was, I certainly didn't have the experience then to see it as I do now. I guess I just accepted early on that I was fucked. The weight of what was against me was insurmountable, and as much as I hated it, I knew I had to work within it. I had to engage with and use the system, to try and take as much from it as it was going to take from me. Trying to rebel against it was just to entrench myself even deeper within the thing I hated. Adhering to the blueprint would allow them to take even more from me and I would get very little back in return.

So, I began going to education classes. English, IT, maths. All the things I should have got at school. But unlike school, I actually wanted to do it this time, and when I was studying, I didn't feel like I was in prison. From there, I enrolled in my first Open University distance learning course, and slowly but surely, gained an upper second-class honours degree in criminology and social policy. Eventually, in the latter stages of my sentence progression, I and two fellow prisoners in the same position, founded a unique research collective with several senior academics and PhD students from various universities across Scotland. We critique, advance and produce research on criminal justice and penal reform together, as colleagues and as friends. Through this remarkable group, I was introduced to the right people at the right time, and thanks to their commitment and belief, I am now, in what I hope to be my final year of custody, in Scotland's only open prison, undertaking a full-time Master's degree at a leading university. To say my experience of education since coming into prison has been incredibly positive and transformative is as big an understatement as is possible to make. What started as something I only engaged with because I saw it as culturally valuable to those who would eventually decide my release on parole, in the end up changed my view of the world, of myself and my potential.

Within the same time frame, I took on a number of roles providing support, advocacy and mentoring in the prison education and induction centres, and eventually went on to become a Samaritans trained listener, helping those struggling to cope with the pressures of

custody. These supporting roles were one of the few avenues in prison where I could feel good about what I was doing. I found a high degree of catharsis, as well as reward, working through my own issues by helping others through theirs. It also showed me vividly, just how damaged the majority of those who come into prison are, particularly in terms of mental health, problem substance use and addiction. Most people arrive in prison from a situation of multiple disadvantage, with over 40% coming from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland. With so many personal chords struck, and so much crossover with my academic study, I am now undertaking qualifications in mental health peer support and counselling.

Also, I began vocational training in the prison hairdressers a few years ago. A friend suggested I get into it as I had already developed a basic skill-set through trial and error over the years with a fellow con who didn't trust the 'weegies' working as barbers on the hall - divisions in Scotland are focused on class and postcode rather than race like in most other western prison populations. I was lucky that the prison I was in at the time was the only one in Scotland offering City & Guilds training and certification, so I went for it. Turned out I had a knack for it, and I really enjoyed the work. This eventually led to an 11-month community work placement in a hairdressers, and an offer of full time employment on release.

So, coming back to clichés. A degree; a trade; a trustee peer worker using my experience to help myself by helping others. I suppose now would be a good time to mention that I wrote a novel as well. As far as prison cliché's go then, I think I've done just about all of them, except learn to play guitar (though I did try once). But the reality, and in my view, the danger is that these supposed clichés aren't actually clichés at all. In fact, they are almost never achieved. They are rare enough individually. Odder still in multiples. Yet people who are not in prison seem to see it as an opportunity or even advantage to achieve all the things they would like to do in their life if they had the time 'it's easy when you're locked up with nothing better to do.' That and the perception that prisoners 'get everything handed to them in there [prison].'

However, prison is not a conducive environment to personal growth and achievement. It is a place wrought with practical, cultural and mental limitations. Education, for example, is extremely limited in prisons, particularly at higher and university level. Of the average

7,500 prisoners in Scotland, only 60 are undertaking Open University study courses, yet this was recently celebrated by the SPS as a massive uptake in higher education. Many more apply for this level of study, but are denied as this is all the space that is available. Open University study is also only available part time, meaning only those with at least 6 years left to serve would be able to complete a full degree. Provided of course that each successive years module is approved by the higher education access board, but this is never guaranteed, not even where the previous year's study has been successful. The party line is that there just isn't enough money in the pot to provide more people with higher level education, even though Scotland supports every one of its citizens to study for their first degree for free. A fact that seems to have escaped the majority of prison staff and the public in general, who still, in spite of this, I have heard regularly voice their distaste for us limited few with 'I'd have to pay for my kids to go to university, and you [prisoner] are getting it for free' which is simply not the case.

Contrary to the popular negative discourse one might read in the tabloid press or hear hurtled with intent from a politician's soapbox, higher educational and vocational opportunities in prison are far less accessible in custody than in the community. What is readily available is education focused primarily on low level qualifications and basic skills. Now, there is an undeniable correlation between those with poor educational attainment and employment history, and those in custody, that absolutely must be addressed. But what prison does is focus on these needs to the point of setting a debilitatingly low aspirational bar, which for me, feeds the already strong negative culture in prison with regard to education and skills development. For those who go on to achieve at a higher level in spite of this, the message tends to be that, either through our incapability to function in the community without the support and structure afforded by the prison, or through active discrimination following a criminal records check, our attainments won't be viable in the 'real world.' This was summed up pretty well for me when a teacher once confided in me her shock and disgust after attending a Higher Education Access Board meeting, where managers from every prison learning centre in Scotland convene to decide which applicants will be granted study for the next year. Here she heard one manager say 'What's the point in giving them [prisoners] degrees' anyway? What are they going to do with them?' Even if I choose to interpret this in the most sympathetic terms with regard to the plight of people with criminal records in modern western societies like the UK, where disclosure legislation

sees many severely hampered in the job market, if not ruled out completely. What then does that say for the provision of educational and vocational training in custody, or the prospects of those who engage? Like me, most people in custody had bad experiences of school, and so the prospect of returning to any kind of education seems absurd. For those who do eventually pluck up the courage to try again, to then be actively infantilised, constructed as deficit, and then, after all their perseverance, be told anything they do achieve will be devalued and dismissed anyway, all those negative prison discourses are simply reaffirmed and reproduced. The SPS during its 'Employment and Employability in Scotland's Prisons - Working for Change' presentation at Strathclyde University in 2018, has recently acknowledged its failings in the fact that 30,000 of its 45,000 receptions a year leave with no job to go to and no supports in place, and has committed itself to researching and promoting employment and training. But even if the prison does address this, providing solid qualifications and training with every confidence, what then do we do about 'out there' in society, where the 'scarlet letter' of the criminal record impedes or excludes us from putting them into practice?

As such we might consider another key aspect of the overarching negative culture towards educational and vocational attainment in prison, encompassing not just our inability, but our undeserving status in society. This has a particularly damning influence on the daily discourse of my fellow prisoners. The very idea that positive pursuits will ever get us anywhere in life; that we will ever get a good job; or that we will ever be accepted or taken seriously, remains a point of derision and doubt. I myself, right up until 2015, before my involvement with the research collective, spoke about my academic achievements and potential life opportunities solely in terms of transferable skills and work ethic. If I was lucky it was going to be what got me a job stacking shelves in a supermarket or mopping floors at McDonald's. I certainly didn't imagine I'd get to do real academic work with it. There is a general defeatist attitude in custody of 'What's the point? No one is ever going to give us a chance' A pessimistic, but not unfounded, outlook, considering the wider societal discourse regarding prisoners, and particularly in the media, who's influence impacts the decision-making process behind any potential prison based initiative. We are, perhaps aptly, a vilified and so undeserving population, who's care, rights, and opportunities are a source of constant contention and public anger. We are consistently portrayed as the blights, scourges and monsters of decent society, so why would they ever want us back? But if we

believe the rest of society doesn't want us, and that we are in fact no longer even part of it, what we perceive as not for us, or as actively against us, we in turn dissociate from and reject. With regard to stigmatisation, a systematically shamed and spurned population is unlikely to foster the motivation to aspire or achieve very much of anything positive. Which is a major problem for a society where over 95% of the people in prison will eventually be released.

This is what I mean when I describe a system at odds with itself. The primary objective of prison is after all punishment. It is the place where society contains and controls those deemed a risk to the public by depriving us of our rights and freedoms. Within this construction, my identity position as a prisoner is deviant and 'other.' I am undeserving and in need of punishment. Prison, in my view, has this part of itself figured out. However, its secondary purpose is now to provide care and rehabilitation, addressing the multiple issues and disadvantages faced by the majority of its population so that they can return to society, and live meaningful, crime free, normal lives (whatever that means).

But its primary role and all that it implies about the nature of its population make it impossible to provide quality care. Be it the work party officer trying to promote our civic identity while reminding us that we have no rights as a worker; the nurse who is supposed to be separate from the prison service and a point of confidentiality and trust, working along-side security staff to interrogate and discipline; the risk practitioner trying to reintegrate us to society by framing us wholly in opposition to it; or the additional prison time served through sanctions that target the behaviours most prevalent within our population, like mental health, addiction and impulsivity, that the prison claims to treat and support.

Whatever else prison tries to be, it can't help being what it is.

Furthermore, my identity position within the rhetoric of 'care' is equally devalued as a deficit proto-citizen in need of supervision and intervention. I do not know what is best for myself, or how to navigate the real world. Neither construction offers scope for equality and parity with decent and responsible members of society. The composite effect, I have come to experience as a kind of 'problem child' identity. Monstrous and helpless. Someone they don't want to care for, but grudgingly must, because it's the right thing to do. That is the

starting point of any interaction, and the baseline against which any personal progress or merit is ultimately measured. Whether control or care, the sense of *undeservingness* and underestimation, is always there, fueling a system of perpetual negative reinforcement that undermines every attempt prison makes to do something positive, and stifles every prisoner's attempt to do something positive within it.

That is not to say that positive things do not happen in prison. Or that people do not make positive choices in there. I would like to think that, if nothing else, my experiences are proof of that. I can also say from those experiences that prison has changed over the years. In the most obvious sense I am glad to report that the dismal days of no in-cell water or power, and the indignity of 'slopping out' that I experienced at the start of my sentence are a thing of the past. But the change is not just in terms of the living conditions. Attitudes are changing; relationships between prisoners and staff are developing; rights and decency top every policy agenda; the gap between the old guard and the new recruits (staff as well as prisoners) is widening. Bad things still occasionally happen of course, but it is definitely a less violent and overtly hostile place now, from both staff and from other prisoners, than it was even when I first came in, and certainly for those older than me. A welcome change in my eyes, though some still look back nostalgically at the 'good old bad old days.' But some things remain constant, like the inevitable powerlessness and disconnectedness from what matters, and the constant, unending mundaneness afforded to dwell on it. Everything that unfortunately gets considered last, if at all. A troubling thought, considering the average time spent in custody has soared over the same period, meaning that disconnect and struggle will surely only get harder to bare.

Herein lies another punitive paradox, and further evidence of the toxic effect of *undeservingness*. As modern westernised prison systems and particularly that of Scotland, a country that likes to pride itself on being at the forefront of liberalism and social justice, become ever more superficially comfortable, and the rhetoric of policy more welfare and care orientated; the more incentivised the media, politicians and the public then are to express their anger and concern for the state of our justice system. Tales of Pampered Lags in Luxury Prisons as a consequence of Soft Touch Justice, fuel calls for tougher, harsher criminal sanctions, increasingly longer sentences, for life to mean life, and even the reinstatement of the death penalty. It's a terrifying logic that seems to take little account of

Scotland seemingly symbiotic punitive as well welfarist trend, with prison sentences steadily increasing, and Scotland handing out proportionately more life sentences than any other country in Europe, including Russia. It would seem the more comfortable prison gets, the longer they need to keep us in to justify it.

To no avail of course, as the notion persists that due to our relatively comfortable and functional modern prison system and living conditions in Scotland and the UK, our imprisonment is therefore not real imprisonment. I regularly hear the influence of this imprisonment denial logic from staff scoffing about our free room and board, lack of real world responsibilities, and wasting taxpayer's money. I hear it even from loved ones, family and friends who genuinely have our interests at heart, quick to declare our situation 'not that bad' upon hearing we have televisions and kettles. This, more than anything, has always made me question the value the average member of society places on their liberty, privacy and dignity, and how easily they take it for granted. The idea that having amenities and home comforts like television makes being locked in a place you can't leave, where nothing is truly yours, where no space within it, or even your own body, is truly safe from intrusion and interrogation, for months, years or even decades, is easy. Or that forcing a wall between all the problems of life, with family, relationships, children, finances, bereavement, means they no longer impact your situation or trouble your mind. I think that says a lot about how we as a society perceive what it means to be 'free.'

So, despite these many cultural and structural factors feeding the perception that I was neither capable nor worthy of my aspirations, or that I would have any chance of doing anything with them or in fact my life out of prison, for some reason, I tried anyway. Not because I am different or stand out in any way - I am no better or significant than anyone else in here beside me. It's just the way I went about it. And my 'resistance' is far from unique. Many of us find ways to stem the tide of prison apathy and limit its erosion. Finding ways to redefine our sense of self, either through our new dimensions or through reimagining and bolstering what we still retain, dedicating all our time to phone calls and visits, becoming more involved and attentive fathers, sons, friends or partners than ever before.

However we get to 'who we are now' in prison, many, like me, fight hard to realise and

legitimise that identity by projecting it out into the world beyond the walls. We all do it in different ways. For me, doing the things I did inside made it easier to stay connected to those outside, because it gave my life momentum. I had things going on now that, for all they were happening in prison, could've been happening anywhere, and so lessening the gulf between the lives of family and friends. I eased their trepidation in assessing what or what not to tell me about their daily lives for fear of making me feel bad about mine. I assuaged their pity for the life I was missing. Especially as, in some cases, it seemed I had a lot more going on than they did! Odder still, in some bizarre turn of events, I had become a positive example, rather than a cautionary tale, to many close to me in the community. With friends and family chastising their wayward children and telling them to look at how well I was doing by studying and making something of my life. It afforded me a strange kind of (re)connection to the lives of those I loved and cared for, allowing us to speak consistently in positives about the worst thing I had ever done, and where it had landed us all as a consequence.

A hugely significant part, if not the most, of my projection into the 'real world', was committing the further cardinal sin of starting a new relationship midway through my sentence. Another ignored piece of advice from most seasoned vets 'never have a [girlfriend/partner] in the jail, it's like doing double time.' But the urge to connect with someone and feel vital, desirable, and wanted by them, to share an intimacy, if only over a phone call, or a visit room table is often just too hard resist. Especially when you opt not to try and kill your loneliness away with drugs. So what started as a few light-hearted flirtatious phone calls with an old friend, slowly turned into an eight year relationship, and now that I am able to visit home, a baby on the way. I love my partner deeply, and I am incredibly happy and proud that we have made it this far together. But the sheer logistics, patience, emotional turmoil and psychological stress involved in maintaining a relationship in custody is enough to make me wholeheartedly agree with the concept of doing double time. It is by no means easy, grinning and baring the rigid boundaries forced between you to steal what little happiness, closeness and intimacy you can during a weekly (if you're lucky to be in a prison close to home) 45 minute visit. Occasionally having it spoiled by an officer who has decided you are sitting too far forward in your chairs; that you've been holding hands for too long; or being physically separated from one of the two opportunities to embrace and kiss (one at the start and one at the end) to be mouth checked or taken away

and strip searched on suspicion of smuggling an illicit item. Or back in the hall, using one of the 4 prison pay phones accommodating the 80 prisoners on each landing, to try to have the big conversations, and share your soul, all the while knowing every call and intimate moment and detail is recorded and monitored by security staff. More often than not, it is a succession of frustration, tears, arguments, suspicions, doubts and resentment of the unrequited desire to change something you can't. It is a life of uncertainty and constant questioning 'can we do this? Can I? Trying to fill that void between you with talk of the future you will have, but in the here and now, always lonely without each other, and always scared of losing each other.

I guess for fairly obvious reasons, prison relationships are very difficult. But beyond the physical institutional barriers, they are also made incredibly difficult by the same negative attitudes and discourses that make all other aspects of prison difficult. There is an idea that the connection a couple make while one of them is in custody, much like the personal growth they make, or the life experiences, qualifications or skills they attain, are not 'real' somehow. They do not count in the same way real people, with real lives, real experiences and real relationships count. And they are open to unbridled criticism and doubt in a way that would be unimaginable in any other context. People I have never met, and in some cases my partner barely even knows, feel quite comfortable to question her as to why she would get involved with someone like me (a prisoner). They tell her she is crazy, that I am not to be trusted and that I am only with her because I am bored or lonely, and that I will leave her when I am out for good. Conversely, many fellow prisoners over the years from close friends to perfect strangers have advised me time and time again that I am 'off my head' and to end it before she leaves me for someone else, if she isn't having an affair already. Even family and friends, again with our best interest at heart, just like their attitude to the conditions of our imprisonment, struggle to qualify and legitimise these relationships, so strong are the beliefs that underpin them.

For those who manage to make it through all that, and get near the point of coming home to make good on the dreams you've cultivated to sustain yourselves, another layer of intrusion and surveillance steps in. The prison and the community justice team becomes very involved in the efficacy of your relationship, and a social work assessment is carried out, not only your relationship, but of your partner herself, her home, and her family, especially if she

already has children. If so, a further child and family social worker will be allocated to speak to them, and the child's school guidance teacher will be notified that their mother's partner is in prison, all against the parents' wishes and without their consent. While all of this unsettling intrusion is going on, the messages being consistently relayed from practitioners are the same as those from everyone else. That this is all necessary to safeguard and protect 'them' from 'me' because I am a proven risk to public safety, and that her fitness as a parent is questionable having invited a violent offender into her family's lives. Those with a good relationship with their community social worker may have things finessed a bit, with things like 'we don't really have any concerns with [prisoner] this is just protocol and we have to do it just to keep everyone safe'. We allow statements like this to placate and distance ourselves from the intrusive nature of the process and the implications behind it, but it chips away nonetheless. And now that the relationship between you has been vetted, it is then subject to constant scrutiny as either a risky or stabilising factor, and the subsequent up's and down's associated with any "normal" relationship, suddenly become a gauge of your [the prisoner's] ability to function in the community.

Finally, an important part of the prison experience I feel is either overlooked in favour of something more exciting, or just completely disregarded as trivial, is the impact of petty authoritarianism and bureaucracy. But that's what prison is, a large, totalising, neo-liberal and extremely risk-averse organisation designed to dominate and control those in its charge. It is a place where one group of people have absolute power over another. And while I do not deny there have been, and will likely always be, cases of very serious abuse and misconduct from staff, in my experience, these are rare. What is constant and universal however, is the little things. The micro-violences. Little demonstrations and abuses of power to remind us of something we never forgot in the first place. That's what prison is for me. It's being strip searched because you were five minutes late for work. It's being administered a suspicion drug test because you're out of sorts with a flu. It's your family travelling 50 miles for a visit and being told they can't get in because, despite the fact they have photographic ID and are known by the officer at the gate, they do not have a utility bill from the last three months with them. It's then being told they can't hand in the allowed items they brought for you as the form you know you filled out and handed in now can't be found. It's being given only half the discs of a DVD box set you've had sent in because you are over your 30 disc limit. It's a new rule that says you can no longer have the ceramic mug

you've had for 7 years because someone in an office somewhere decided it could be used as a weapon. It's not being allowed to keep your own quilt or pillow cases anymore because someone in the same office decided they were a fire risk. It's being placed on a disciplinary report for having 4 towels in your cell instead of 2. It's being searched on suspicion of making 'hooch' because you have 'too much fruit.' It's having your visit terminated for holding hands with your partner. It's being stopped and questioned for no other reason than staff feel like today might be the day. It's all these petty, minor things, and the major potential impact they have on our lives, our progression, release on parole, all the time, day in day out, week, month and year after year, that compound and grind away. Things that would quite rightly drive the average person crazy, but we can't afford to react to.

All the while we are being collectively risk assessed and managed by practitioners we haven't met, in meetings we aren't allowed to attend, being judged on information we are not entitled full disclosure to, and so cannot fully interrogate or verify. Chasing up reports from government ministers, hall managers, personal officers, psychologists, mental health workers, addiction support workers and social workers from custody and community. Having our close personal relationships with partners, family and friends vetted for 'stability.' Being held up for years on backlogged waiting lists for offence-focused intervention programmes whose efficacy is unfounded. Or watching months roll by awaiting spaces in specialist facilities that we must be tested in before being considered for release. Watching each stumbling block impact the next critical date. Being made to feel that however much time it costs us, even if it exceeds our original sentence as a consequence, is not important. Having to constantly evidence a journey of progression and personal development, because it is not enough to just behave and comply. Having every significant aspect of your life, and self, reduced to a score on risk assessment to determine the threat you pose to society. It's having to learn the rules of the game or perpetually slipping back to square one.

I made a choice early on to know my enemy, to learn the language, demonstrate the skills. And while it has served me well in terms of navigating the system, sadly, I am so well versed in it that even with my family and friends during periods of community home leave, I find it hard not to frame the good things in my life in the context of reducing my risk, of building my capital, and giving me the structure I need to keep me out of trouble. I really hope I will

stop it one day, and talk about them solely in terms of joy.

So, what more can I really say about prison? After all this time, and so much of my life, it's too big a thing to really quantify. I'm frustrated even trying. Right now, I'm thinking about all I've said here and I'm thinking, 'It's not enough. I've skipped over too much. I've not explained things right.' The whole thing seems disjointed and at odds with itself. Resistance through compliance. Disconnection, reinvention, and reconnection. A demonised role model. A successful failure. A reintegrated other. My account is as contrary as the system I describe. Adding even more confusion, I give it from a place of limbo at the latter stages of my sentence, living half in and out of custody, and conflating all the problems of community alongside it. Perhaps I ought to explain the ins and outs of the sentencing, progression and parole system in Scotland? Dedicate a paragraph just to the dynamics of community reintegration? I don't know. All I really do know, is that prisons, and prisoners, are more than the headlines you read in the paper, or the stories you hear in the news. We are more than the statistics filling government documents and academic journals. We are more than the monsters, or the failures of society. Our lives, our problems, our hopes, dreams, aspirations and fears, are no different than yours. We are human. Flawed. Dangerous in some cases. But human all the same. And prison is an inherently damaging place for humans. Yet society keeps finding ways to send more and more of us there for longer and longer. Some are sent for punishment. Safety. Rehabilitation. Support. Some are sent to be forgotten. Some because society just doesn't know what else to do. Whatever the reason, I feel confident to say that prison will not make us better, or society safer, it will simply hurt us all, one way or another. Any good we achieve, will be done so in spite of the unyielding, empty disaffection we are forced to accept as 'life.'

Ultimately, there is something inherently toxic about the prison, not just as place but as concept, that denigrates and devalues everything it touches, to the point I see exactly why so many of my peers still maintain that I have done my time completely the wrong way, and would never dream to follow suit. The doxa of monsterisation, undeservingness, incapability and illegitimacy is so strong, that even standing here with a degree; a trade; a long term partner; a home to go to; offers of employment; and set to get my parole at the first opportunity, having moved successfully through the prison progression system without issue; to many other prisoners I am still just a naïve, delusional 'first offender' who will

struggle in the real world; and whose success thus far is predicated on being a quiet, goody-two-shoes and not a 'real con' like them. So to all those who do their very best to resist the toxicity of prison in ways that don't keep you there any longer than you have to be, I take my hat off to you. Because from the bricks and mortar, through the policy and practice, to the society and the culture, the odds are truly against us, every step of the way.

Prison is a necessary evil, if for no other reason than it's where I know I deserve to be. I have done amazing things with my time there, perhaps some of the most important things I will ever do, and might never have done otherwise. But it is because of this, that I can safely say that what prison is, and what it's trying to be, doesn't work, if for no other reason than I am one of far too few exceptions, that, unfortunately, proves the rule.
