

SELECTED WORKS

PATRICK IRVING[∞]

The Harbinger is proud to present selected works of Patrick Irving. Irving writes “First Amend This!” a monthly newsletter that offers a firsthand look into the Idaho prison system, drawing from his personal experiences in a maximum security institution. Irving writes with a sharp eye toward injustice, documenting day-to-day deprivations and abuses that plague the system. His scathing sense of humor percolates throughout his detailed accounts, creating a unique voice that powerfully critiques his surroundings.

The Harbinger is pleased to share four different pieces from various issues of First Amend This! Together, they offer snapshots of different issues that Mr. Irving and those in Idaho prisons have confronted over the past few years.

GRANDPA’S FAVORITE FLAVORS BEAR THE BRUNT IN THE BATTLE OF HOMEBREW

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The Department has instructed Keefe Commissary to discontinue sales of the following items to the clients it houses in Close Custody quarters: Butterscotch Buttons, Starlight Mints, Rootbeer Barrels and sugar.

It’s alleged that all above have been purposed as illicit and abused in upbeat celebrations, such as Russian Yom Kippur.

These contraband confections will still be made available to less aggressive residents with fewer ambitions in chemistry; those residents, however, will from here on out be limited to purchasing three bags of candy every sixty days.

Residents experiencing issues with alcoholism are encouraged to attend their facilities’ AA meetings — with the exception, of course, of those condemned to Close Custody, who are welcome instead to dial this number during the days in which they’re given access to phones:

Idaho Suicide Prevention Hotline – (208) 398-HELP (4357)

ALL OF US GOT COVID, ONLY A FEW GOT TESTED

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On January 2 my neighbors got sick, and it quickly spread throughout our whole unit. Coughing and cold sweats, fevers and sore throats, we were in agony and it was apparent. Within a few days a memo was issued, informing us all that Covid was present: masks would be required and some restrictions enforced, but only those who tested positive would be required to quarantine.

The person from my cohort who reported his symptoms immediately tested positive and found himself in quarantine.

His cellies and neighbors weren't tested behind him. No one was asked to and no one complained. We were more concerned with having access to the dayroom than receiving the level of care our prisons' medical service provides.

Of the staff that stayed to work, some were symptomatic and made the best they could out of an unusually bad situation. (Kudos to IMSI A-Unit staff for making sure our needs were met in extremely respectable fashion.) After last year's employee exodus, management's options were undoubtedly dismal. Forcing all our facility's workers to quarantine after exposure would have left our facility without any workers.

Unfortunately, for residents housed in Ad-Seg, where, for up to years at a time, one can hardly enjoy any time away from their cell, catching Covid from staff who came to work sick left little in the way of work ethic to be admired.

Back on my unit, two lucky souls, as sick as the rest, were seen rolling their property one morning to be transferred to better facilities. I couldn't help but wonder how they would be greeted and how long it would take to get everyone sick.

I also wonder how many of us were waiting for booster shots when Covid came through. I asked for my booster with a flu shot back in November and, as this issue goes to print, have yet to receive either.

To be fair, I find myself wondering whether it would've even mattered. It was impossible to discern the statuses now issued with Covid among the makeup of my unit and cohort. The only one among us who wasn't writhing around in agony was boasting of the fact that he'd already caught it twice. Even then, he wasn't asymptomatic. In fact, the asymptomatic percentages widely presented conflicts with the data now kept in our notes.

As for our restricted housing units — used to isolate residents for extended periods of time — with "preventative measures," they should've been practically impenetrable. Perhaps the protection words alone offer equal null.

Or perhaps it was a matter of decision that was forced upon the guard. Some might understand how one could consciously decide to open up the gates for a formal frontal assault, get the worst of it over and go on with their lives.

Out with the cloud of Covid, in the cloud of confusion...

\$283,100,000 ISN'T ENOUGH TO BUY EVERYONE A WORKBOOK

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Knowing a minimum of \$27,134 was spent last year to house me in corrections, I set out to discover whether any portion of this year's budget would be used to assist me in serving my sentence constructively.

My investigation begins six and a half years into my fifteen- to thirty-nine-year sentence, imposed by the State for two counts of arson. Having committed my crime in a drug-induced psychosis — after chemically medicating to cope with some grief — I presumed that the Department possessed the utility to assist me in addressing my addictions, afflictions and deconstructive tendencies.

What I found instead was that despite \$283.1M pulled from state coffers this year to fund our Corrections, case managers are still unable to accommodate everyone.

To some extent, the situation is understandable: we lack the staff and instructors to make the most of our classrooms. And classrooms, it's said, is where the magic happens.

But classes for me were never an option. And not just because I'm Ad-Segged during a pandemic, but because the Idaho Maximum Security Institution only offers treatment and church to select groups of inmates. (See: Grievance IM 190000344.)

Thus I'm found in my cell, prepared to go it alone, but hoping nonetheless for an IDOC workbook.

Workbooks: Often prescribed with a regimen of classes, they're used to treat everything from sexual deviance to a spectrum of violent tendencies.

Workbooks are considered a staple in correctional therapies. So much so that, without completing workbooks, one is unlikely to be granted parole.¹

Unfortunately, as most case managers will tell you: "There are only enough chairs in each class for the parole-eligible to participate, and only enough workbooks available to go with each chair."

My case manager provided no exception. Regretfully, she informed me, her stock of supplies were shy of nonexistent. The only therapeutic materials she had to offer me were skeletal printouts available online.

¹ When COVID arrived and closed all our classrooms, the Department continued issuing thousands of certificates, presumably based on workbook participation alone. These are the same certificates required to meet criteria for parole.

So even if each workbook costs north of \$20 — which would be unlikely considering they're purchased in bulk — why not distribute them to everyone willing to treat their behaviors, and give our case managers something more to work with?

Sympathetic to the limits imposed on her abilities, I asked if something was available for processing grief and for something, if they had it, along the lines of future-thinking.

At my window arrives, a few days later, one mental health clinician, excited to be of service.

And as seven fresh printouts were passed through the seams of my steel door, I credited he and my case manager for the sheets and their warmth.

Fresh cup of coffee, it was time to start my treatment.

Complicated Grief: Sometimes, the symptoms of acute grief never seem to go away. They can last for years. The loss of a loved one continues to feel unreal and unmanageable. You might constantly yearn for the deceased, or experience guilt about the idea of “moving on” and accepting the loss.

Of the five paragraphs found on page one, that diagnosis best suited my condition.

Tasks of Mourning: 1) accept the reality of the loss, 2) process the pain of grief, 3) adjust to a world without the deceased and, 4) find a way to remember the deceased while moving forward in life.

Twenty-three sentences later, page two complete, I remedially realized I had let go of a monster: The recommended internal, external and spiritual adjustments were taking. Only two more pages and I'd transform my whole being.

My Stages of Grief: Describe in a few short lines how the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance have affected you.

Page three? Shit — I murdered that f*ckin' page, and wasted no time filling out the Goodbye on page four.

*To: Dominic, You Dead Sonofabitch
CC: Terry, Don, Jolene, Melissa, Sue, Heath*

*I am saying goodbye because.....it's been almost a decade.
Saying goodbye makes me feel.....like feelings are intruders.
I remember a time when we.....pleaded many Fifts.
You taught me.....righteousness is awesome.
Something I want you to know is.....I'm still performing numbers.
I will always remember.....that we're the kind to not forget.*

From: Therapist Pat

At this point, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that I was gifted a miracle. It was like I had been touched by the compassion, grace, and sensitive understanding one only expects from a weird distant uncle.

That horrible chapter closed, I was ready to tackle cognition.

Socratic Questions: Thoughts are like a running dialogue in your brain. They come and go fast. So fast, in fact, that we rarely have the time to question them. Because our thoughts determine how we feel, and how we act, it's important to challenge any thought that causes us harm.

Interesting, how all one needs to checkmate their thoughts is two greasy elbows and four stupid questions.

Decatastrophizing: Cognitive distortions are irrational thoughts that have the power to influence how you feel. Everyone has some cognitive distortions they're a normal part of being human. However, when cognitive distortions are too plentiful or extreme, they can be harmful.

Page two's questions came at me a little rougher. Fortunately for me, I was already rushing from huffing humanity's finest.

Naked on the shitter, I continued pressing on.

- 1) What are you worried about?
- 2) How likely is it your worry will come true?
- 3) If your worry comes true, what's the worst that could happen?
- 4) If your worry comes true, what's most likely to happen?
- 5) If your worry comes true, what are the chances you'll be okay?

Third and final page, time to slay the dragon.

Thoughts and Behaviors (Cost/Benefit Analysis): List the costs and benefits of seven thoughts or behaviors. Rate the importance of each from 1-10. After reviewing the costs and benefits of the current thought or behavior, develop a more adaptive alternative.

Tens across the board and I believe that I've evolved.

The feeling, unreal, is something I suspect is worth informing the others – once I'm done screaming to the fiends that are weening in the vent, asking all and any if they'll double-check my work.

**WHILE NINE FIGURES CAN BE SPENT TO ADDRESS OUR
OVERCROWDING, TWO SHITS CAN'T BE GIVEN TO PREPARE
US FOR PAROLE**

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We bring you a Department now deep in crisis, hundreds of millions of dollars are the cost of their peril, with staff-to-resident ratios rapidly rising, more beds are direly needed, and the COVID doth compound...

With \$6,000,000 in efforts to mitigate recidivism, \$170,000,000 asked for to build a brand new prison, and \$5,500,000 withdrawn to deal with understaffing, someone has forgotten to print the goddamn packets that prepare us to be interviewed for that release valve called parole.

Per Policy 607.26.01.014 (Program Management for Inmates), correctional case managers (CCMs) are responsible for distributing Parole Hearing Interview Packets four months prior to their clients' scheduled hearings.

But according to at least one case manager, who I heard from my cell chastising a neighbor, this particular mandate is strictly ornamental. "Trying to [hold me accountable] for not getting you your packet is like me writing you up for that cover on your lamp..."

For this case manager, the following apparently doesn't matter: 1) The imprisoned have no influence on the remainder of your life; 2) The imprisoned aren't paid by the state to not handknit themselves a lampshade; 3) The imprisoned never interviewed to provide their potential caseload with the papers required to reunite them with their loved ones.

What all case managers know is that parole is not a given. It requires a hearing with plenty of planning and relies on the discretion of those who make the Board. Deliberative with details, they require much information; and like other judicial hearings, it's not to be taken lightly.

Which is why when packets for August arrived in September, several on my unit found themselves in a panic.

CCM Hottinger, I wrote Ms. Hutchins a concern form asking for an extension on...my personal history questionnaire. I woke up for breakfast on the morning of September 16 and it was lying on the floor in front of my cell door. The date it's due is 9-27-21. That leaves me just 11 days to prepare a whole parole plan and fill out two lengthy and complex questionnaires! If I would've just gotten it when I was suppose to...I would've had two months [to work on it]. I had to push the issue to even get it at all! I feel a two week extension, all things considered, is appropriate. Don't you?

The concern was returned with this unsurprising response:

You can take as long as you need but if the [pre-hearing investigator] schedules your hearing and it isn't ready, that is on you. It does not take more than a few days to complete it if you have prepared for this as much as you say

you have.

Though my neighbor is a man who just lost his mother—the person he relied upon to assist with his parole plan—his represents neither an isolated incident nor a special-needs example. Collecting the information required for the parole hearing interview is, in fact, an incredibly tedious process. One that entails collaborative communication between counselors, case managers, families, physicians, landlords and employers—just to name a few. And without access to the internet or reliable use of the phone, it can take several weeks to place your best forward and make the case on paper that you're ready for parole. Eight working days is not enough time.

The IDOC Parole Hearing Interview Packet has since been transcribed and made available here. If you know of someone soon up for parole, please help prepare them for their pre-hearing interview: they'll be asked to provide letters of reference and verification; criminal, work, treatment, scholastic and military history; histories from family and/or people they'll be living with; and prospective employment, housing and treatment programs details—with primary and secondary plans required for all.