

INTERVIEW

Q: How long have you been a psychiatrist?

A: *Since the mid 1970s. I've worked in private practice, nursing homes, community mental health centers, the counseling center of a large university, and jails and prisons. The prisons may have had the most impact on me.*

Q: How so?

A: *For starters, they're very interesting. We consider them grim and forbidding—and they are, as a rule — but they also fascinate us. Look at the popularity of prison-based novels, movies, and TV shows, from John Cheever's Falconer to Orange is the New Black. The work is endlessly challenging and can be surprisingly rewarding. It's possible that, minute for minute, I've been more useful in Corrections than anywhere else.*

Q: Surely you exaggerate.

A: *Not really. Some of my inmates had never seen a doctor or dentist, much less a shrink. The idea that a person would listen to them, and try to help them, and even promote some positive changes in their lives, can be completely new. They're often very grateful. That is, when they don't want to kill me.*

Q: Since you bring it up, have you ever felt in harm's way?

A: *Perhaps a dozen times, no more. In the jail we'd get newly arrested inmates who were pretty high. The most dangerous ones had used illy — marijuana treated with embalming fluid. Worse than cocaine, in my experience. But I've been attacked in other settings. During my residency, a girl leaped up, dove at me from across the room, and brought me down with a tackle worthy of the NFL. She was seventeen, and she weighed about 110.*

Let me express appreciation here for the Correctional Officers (COs). They remind me of Secret Service agents in that they'll put themselves at risk to protect others. They're also keen observers of the inmates. If one says, "Listen, Doc, you better watch out for Jones today; he doesn't look right to me," you're a fool if you ignore him.

Q: How did you get into that kind of work? Was it something you'd considered before you actually did it?

A: *God, no. I got into it by a fluke. When I began a private practice, I had two patients, educational loans and a ton of other expenses. They offered me a part-time position at a place called the Whiting Forensic Institute, and I took it.*

Q: What was it like there?

A: *Intimidating. Whiting received inmates from all over the state, the ones that jails and prisons couldn't handle. Inmates found incompetent to stand trial, or who needed an extensive psychiatric evaluation. Before Whiting, I'd never set foot in a correctional facility. Suddenly I found myself among men who'd committed horrific acts, the stuff of nightmares. My first week, they sent us a serial killer. Talk about being in over your head. . .*

Q: So, from there you went to other places?

A: Yes, to the more traditional facilities. Over time, I grew used to them — used to the barbed wire-topped fences and locked steel doors, and the undeniable element of danger. Plus, the frustration of dealing with a bureaucracy that creaked and sputtered like a Model T.

Q: When did you begin to write about them?

A: I wrote my first prison pieces, nonfiction, in the 1980s. One of them was about the death penalty, still on the books but unused for decades. The COs strapped me into the electric chair. I wanted to see what it felt like.

Q: How did it feel?

A: As creepy as anything I've ever known. Funny, because and it was disconnected, and they didn't fasten the electrodes anyway. It was no more dangerous than a front porch rocker, but my heart rate still hit about 140.

Q: Do you write about other topics too?

A: Yes, about all kinds of things. Articles on managed care and blended families, both of which I know about personally. Travel pieces, mainstream fiction, and a screenplay about *Lady Macbeth*.

Q: Why her?

A: Why not? She's my candidate for the most interesting woman in Western literature.

Q: Any plans for future projects?

A: Yes, but first let's see if I can pull off this one.

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