



Pre-Issue

Edited by Robert P. Langley

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Could The Oregon Way Be In Peril? (By Robert P. Langley)

The other morning at breakfast, I was sitting with some friends from the row when we began to talk about the state of our community... It was just basic stuff like what we thought of the acting Superintendent (we couldn't pick him out of a line-up); what changes might be coming down the pipeline (D-Block being turned into quarantine housing); when we thought the "booster" vaccination would become available (sooner than later); bemoaning the canteen's inability to fill an order (frustrating...). Anyway, during the course of our discussion about the acting Superintendent one of my friends said, "Well, Bob, I guess you better start looking for a new job..." As expected, I asked him, "Why do you say that?" To which he replied (only half jokingly), "Because the 'Oregon Way' is strapped to the gurney and about to be executed!" (Since we're all still sentenced to death - we've developed an odd sense of humor).

Clearly, my friend's inference was that in the absence of Superintendent Kelly's leadership "the Oregon Way" is on its deathbed and once it dies...it will take with it all of the privileges and responsibilities that it has bestowed on the Lifers' Unlimited Club (LUC) to the graveyard; thereby, making my services on the Activities Floor unnecessary (e.g., the LUC's activities will be curtailed, fundraisers will become uncommon, staffing will be manipulated so as to reduce AIC programs and services, basically, diminishing all of the things the Oregon Way ushered in).

After breakfast I began to think to myself, "Is the Oregon Way really circling the drain? If so, who put it in the sink and pulled the plug?" Or, has the pendulum of progress reached its natural peak and, organically, begun to swing back towards decline? Maybe, entropy has sunk its teeth into the energy required to sustain it and, as a correction's policy, it's dying of natural causes... Who knows?

Like many state agencies the Oregon Department of Corrections (ODOC) is a conglomeration of contending forces. For that reason, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that given its weakened state,

opponents of the Oregon Way (inside and outside of the institution) have grasped an opportunity to exert themselves by actively undermining its basic principles in order to – in the absence of Superintendent Kelly – accelerate its demise. If true, I wonder if they understand that to the same degree they destabilize it, they're also undermining their own long-term health and wellbeing? (Maybe, its detractors can't see this result because they're unable to place their actions into a greater context... "*At its foundation, the Oregon Way is about prioritizing employee health and wellbeing by normalizing the correctional environment* and, in turn, improving the outcomes for incarcerated people."). (<http://www.oregon.gov>). (Emphasis added).

Perhaps the Oregon Way simply leapfrogged the rules that were written during the rise of the prison industry in the 1970s, 80s and 90s – when the political and correctional goals were mass incarceration. You know, the good old days when rehabilitation meant retribution and the lock-them-up and throw away the key mentality spawned numerous mandatory sentencing laws to legitimize the industries' newly built prisons. ("Build it and they will come." - *Field of Dreams*).

And now, maybe someone is using those out-of-date rules as a sword to slay the Oregon Way's advancement and a shield to hide behind so as to defend their actions and disguise their motives. But again, who knows? I will say, however, the voice emanating from within ODOC is disconcerting. More so, because we can't tell whether the voice is a disgruntled backup singer humming a few bars or a lead singer shrouding a choir... Either way, we're familiar with the lyrics; predictably, someone's always there to sing them whenever an oppressed people's ascension begins to feel threatening. ("Who'll provided the grand design for what is yours and what is mine." - *Eagles*).

In any case, with uncertainty in the air and little to no communication from the powers that be (who know silence is a *passive form of communication*), it's not hard to wonder what the future holds for the Oregon Way at the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP). Or, for that matter, what affect its abandonment may have on the institution overall and the LUC specifically. By way of example, the LUC's Mission Statement provides:

"The purpose of the Lifer's Unlimited Club is to unite the incarcerated men of OSP with a goal of improving the quality of life for those inside and outside of these walls. The club will work with charity programs, informational services, youth speaking panels and other positive programs. We cannot change the past, however, we believe through rehabilitation and pro-social behavior we can create a more productive future."

In the same way, the ODOC's philosophy behind the Oregon Way provides:

"The Oregon Way is a philosophical approach to corrections based on best practices in security and the belief that humanizing and normalizing the prison environment is beneficial for employees and the people we incarcerate." (<http://www.oregon.gov>).

Noticeably, the LUC's Mission Statement and ODOC's Oregon Way are congruent in that they both strive to employ ideals and principles that are designed to promote the health and overall wellbeing of AIC and ODOC employees. Clearly, it's no secret the LUC is working in accord with the ODOC to achieve the "goal of improving the quality of life for those inside and outside of these walls" (LUC's Mission Statement) while "humanizing and normalizing the prison environment." (ODOC's Oregon Way).

Indeed, LUC's forward leaning vision has been to embrace the philosophy behind the Oregon Way by becoming an effective, diverse and reliable partner for the change it represents. So, why is there an emerging consensus that our partnership is about to be dissolved? Was the Oregon Way real in the first place – or – just a transitory policy? Is it possible that removing just one card (Supt. Kelly) from the deck collapsed ODOC's "belief that humanizing and normalizing the prison environment is beneficial for employees and the people we incarcerate?" (<http://www.oregon.gov>).

If the Oregon Way's message recedes, will all of the progress that we've made under it recede with it? If so, what will fill its void? Will OSP return to some of its darker days? Who determines the outcome?

Recently, I've been hearing a counter message indicating nothing is going to change and OSP is still going to pursue the philosophy behind the Oregon Way. However, given signals to the contrary, it sounded more like, "Okay. Perhaps there will be a few tweaks here and there – and it may look a little bit different than you remember – but nevertheless, it will still be *called* the Oregon Way." And, speaking as someone who has personally benefited from the Oregon Way, this makes me nervous... Instinctively, I think if Superintendent Kelly is not returned to his position the Oregon Way will go through a metamorphosis. What it will become is anyone's guess; but the one thing I do know: The most committed people will shape its future.

In the end, I question whether the Oregon Way has caught a cold or COVID-19? Has it been vaccinated? In other words, is the infrastructure, enthusiasm and courage in place to allow it to survive? Or, is it on life support and unable to breathe without assistance? If so, who will provide it? Who will step up and come to its aide? In my opinion, it has to be its beneficiaries; that is to say, the AIC and staff who still believe in it. Otherwise, we may have to call a coroner. (RPL).

Editor's note:

The above article was written to expose the temperature of the room. In the bigger picture, it's important to remember the Oregon Way is in its infancy as far as major policy changes go...and...since we're its first generation we can expect growing pains.

Personally, I wholly support all of ODOC's staff wellness measures; clearly, the healthier they are the better it is for all of us. Although it's not always discussed, many facets of their health are tethered directly to our own. So, I'll do my part to contribute to their wellbeing (as well as my own) by being responsible, making good decisions and living honorably. But let's not forget that the same conditions and factors that caused their poor health are the same conditions and factors that caused many of ours. ("As evidence emerged about the adverse impact of harsh correctional environments on officer health, equally concerning studies were published showing the profound negative toll special (restrictive) housing can take on the health and well-being of people in prison." – *Advancing Corrections Journal, Transforming Prison Culture to Improve Correctional Staff Wellness and Outcomes for Adults in Custody "The Oregon Way,"* by Cyrus Ahalt, Colette S. Peters, Heidi Steward & Brie A. Williams). My message to my peers is, "After coming this far; let's not allow ourselves to be left behind." My message to ODOC is, "We want to be healed too."

As someone who has spent over three decades locked up in "special (restrictive) housing," I feel that I have a moral obligation to speak on this subject. Presumably, OSP's normalization efforts will permit the LUC to continue this discussion in its upcoming October 2021 Newsletter. (RPL).