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**OPPRESSION:
SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC
REALITIES**

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RUTGERS UNIVERSITY
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OPPRESS: 1. To burden harshly, unjustly, or tyrannically 2. To weigh heavily upon the mind or spirit.

My early observations of oppression began when I was a 12 or 13 year old watching television and seeing children of African decent my own age in the South being hosed by police and bitten by dogs for trying to go to school. I think it was then that I promised myself to stand beside them when I could.

By the time I was 19, I had moved to Nashville, Tennessee to work in the civil rights movement. By 1965, I was in Memphis working with the James Meredith marches and the NAACP. In 1966, I moved to Knoxville, Tennessee and began working at Highlander Adult Education Center, which was the training school for almost all of the people who were organizers in the South. Rosa Parks was trained there, along with Martin Luther King, Kwame Toure (known as Stokely Carmichael), Rap Brown and hundreds of others. It was the only place in the South where culturally diverse groups could meet. At one point, the State of Tennessee was investigating all Highlander staff for sedition (which is treason against the State) and we were under court injunction forbidding us to continue training. We were allowed to have musical workshops though, so we sang our way into training. I remember that for each workshop, people were assigned to patrol that perimeter of Highlander with shotguns.

In the years following I became an organizer, and by 1970 I had moved north. I worked either professionally or personally in the Women's movement, the gay movement, the anti-war movement with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, or in the Welfare Rights and Housing movements. Each of these movements combatted oppression. I went back to school to get my BSW and my MSW. In 1976 I began to work with the American Friends Service Committee's Criminal Justice Program. The AFSC is the social action arm of the Religious Society of

Friends, the Quakers. They have a 300-year history of commitment in dealing with human rights issues for prisoners. Quakers were actively engaged in the Underground Railroad, which helped move slaves from the South into Northern freedom.

In some sense I've come full circle beginning with civil rights and now working with human rights. Every minute of my work and much of my personal life has been spent in combating the oppression of United States government policies.

To me, the politics of the systems- the welfare system, the public school system, the health care system, and the criminal justice system- play a profound role in the lives of the poor in this country. It is hard not to note that the rules and regulations of most of these systems which affect almost all of us, are created, written, voted upon by mostly white males whose lives will not be touched by their decisions. Their children do not go to public schools, they do not use public hospitals, and should they commit a crime, even their prisons are different.

Certainly, in the criminal justice system, the politics of the police, the politics of the courts, the politics of the prison system, and the politics of the death penalty are a manifestation of the racism and classism which governs so much of the lives of all of us in this country. Every part of the United States criminal justice system falls most heavily on the poor and people of color, including the fact that slavery is still permitted in prisons by the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Although prison labor is not the focus of our dialogue tonight, involuntary prison slavery is real.

I've spent a lot of time with young people in Newark and other cities. They tell me that the police feel like an occupation army, as if the inner cities are militarized zones. They feel that the courts are used as feeder systems to filter young blacks and Latinos into prisons where their young bodies are worth a fortune. I've heard people say that the criminal justice system

doesn't work. I've come to believe exactly the opposite- that it works perfectly as a matter of both economic and political policy.

Prisons are one of the largest growth industries in the U.S. at this time. We live in an age where young males of color have been moved out of a historical state of oppression into one of uselessness in the economic context of this country. They have been discarded as a waste product of the technological revolution, with illegal drugs turning the Ghettoized poor into invalids just as alcohol was introduced to incapacitate the people of the First Nations.

I don't believe that it is an accident that people who are perceived as economic liabilities have been turned into a major economic asset- for the young male of color who is worth nothing in the country's economy suddenly generates between 30 and 60 thousand dollars a year once trapped in the criminal justice system. Nor do I believe it's an accident that this technological revolution has been accompanied by the largest explosion of building prisons in the history of the world. We can't ignore that the expansion of prisons, parole, probation, the court and police systems has resulted in an enormous bureaucracy. The expansion of the prison system has been a boon to everyone from architects, plumbers, and electricians to food and medical vendors, all with one thing in common- a pay check earned by keeping human beings in cages. The criminal justice system costs multi-billions of dollars which means that there are a lot of people being paid a lot of money for containing mostly folks of color in cages in human warehouses. The criminalization of poverty is a lucrative business and it seems that we've replaced the social safety net with a dragnet. I doubt that this would be tolerated if we were talking about white folks or rich folks.

For the past 23 years, I have been a human rights advocate on behalf of prisoners in the United States. I'd like to share with you some of the voices that I hear during my day:

This is from a letter by a social security worker at Utah State prison who writes, "John was directed to leave the strip cell and a urine soaked pillow case was placed over his head like a hood. He was walked, shackled and hooded to a different cell where he was placed in a device called "the chair"..... he was kept in the chair for over 30 hours resulting in extreme physical and emotional suffering."

Another writes on behalf of Scotty Lees in Arizona. He describes him being placed in a restraint chair. He was stripped naked and placed in the chair with his buttocks several inches below his knees. His arms and legs were then cuffed and shackled to the legs of the chair to prevent him from moving. He was left uncovered and unprotected in pain for over 24 hours. Mobility was non-existent. He couldn't relieve himself without soiling himself..."

From Florida, "during the struggle, jailers shocked Norberg multiple times with stun guns. Inmates who witnessed his death estimate that he was shocked between eight and twenty times. The medical examiner put it at 22 times..."

From Colorado, "I was sprayed with pepper spray and it was 10 hours before I was allowed to wash. This resulted in burns and blisters to my arms, face, chest, and feet. For the entire 10 hours I felt like I was being boiled alive. When you are forced to stand in the sun with no shelter, the sweat from your body continues to reactivate this chemical agent so that you remain in extreme pain."

"A woman in Texas writes, "The guard sprayed me with pepper spray because I wouldn't take my clothes off in front of five male guards. Then they carried me to a cell, laid me down on a steel bed and took my clothes off. They left me in that cell with that pepper spray in my face and nothing to wash my face with. I didn't give them any reason to do that. I just didn't want to take my clothes off."

Some of the most poignant letters are from prisoners writing on behalf of mentally ill prisoners- like the man in California who spread feces over his body. The guards' response to this was to put him in a bath so hot it boiled 30% of the skin off his body. Article 1 of the United Nations Convention Against Torture prohibits "physical or mental pain and suffering, inflicted to punish, coerce, or discriminate for any reason." Practices such as the indefinite use of shackles and other mechanical restraints, the administration of dangerous chemical treatments, or the practice of extended isolation put the US in violation of United Nations Treaties and Covenants, which it has signed. For those of us dealing with this kind of oppression on a daily basis, use of the United Nations Covenants and Treaties has enormous potential because it is international law. For the first time ever, human rights groups like Amnesty International, the World Organization Against Torture, Human Rights Watch, and Prison Watch Internationale have all reported on the persistent and widespread pattern of human rights violations in the US. The American Friends Service Committee has been a contributor to each of those reports.

These past years have been full of hundreds and hundreds of calls and complaints of an increasingly disturbing nature from prisoners and their families throughout the United States. Most describe inhumane conditions including cold, filth, callous medical care, extended isolation sometimes lasting over a decade, use of devices of torture, harassment, and brutality.

I have received vivid descriptions of four point restraints, restraint hoods, restraint belts, restraint beds, stun grenades, stun guns, stun belts, tethers, waist and leg chains, and something called an air taser.

The use of extended isolation has been a growing concern for many prison activists, both inside and outside the walls. The reports coming in about the use of devices of torture have largely been from isolation units

where there are few witnesses. In New Jersey, prisoner Ojore Lutalo has been held in the Management Control Unit in isolation since February 4, 1986. He is let out for an hour and a half every other day. He has basically been told that he is being kept in sensory deprivation because of what he "could do if he wanted to." Ruchel Magee lived under these conditions in California for more than 20 years. Russell Shoats has been living in various Pennsylvania isolation units for 17 years.

There are thousands of others as well. The monitoring that the American Friends Service Committee has done leads us to believe that approximately 10 per cent of the US prison population lives in extended enforced isolation. The prisoners tell me that the silence is eerie and that the conditions of confinement are torture. Picture yourself living in a human cage the size of your bathroom for 15 years. You are placed in this cage in a literal human warehouse where you will stay 24 hours a day, day in and day out, year in and year out. In the more progressive units, you may be allowed into a bare concrete yard for exercise twice a week for an hour. Mail and reading material is censored. When you leave your cage, you are strip-searched which often includes a pointedly humiliating anal probe. You are shackled around your waist and handcuffed. You are entirely under the control of guards who carry long, black clubs they refer to as "nigger beaters."

Many of us trace the development of control units to the tumultuous years of the civil rights movement when many activists found themselves in US prisons. Sensory deprivation as a form of behavior modification was used extensively with imprisoned members of the Black Panther Party, Black Liberation Army (BLA) formations, Puerto Rican Independentistas, members of the American Indians Movement (AIM), and white radicals. In later years we found jailhouse lawyers, Islamic militants, and prisoner activists placed in extended isolation. It is no surprise that Ojore, Ruchell, and Maroon Shoats are all connected in some way to either the Panther or BLA formations. In 1978, Andrew

Young, who was the US Ambassador to the United Nations at the time, noted the existence of US political prisoners, those folks are still in prisons throughout the country over 20 years later.

Right now, the latest explosion filling the isolation cages includes youth of color, imprisoned as a result of the racist crack-cocaine laws. And of all the people that I've seen in these units over the years, these youngsters are the most ill prepared for the torment of endless isolation. Current efforts to expand the solitary confinement population involve the alleged spread of gang problems in US prisons. In New Jersey, the Department of Corrections recently built a 720 bad gang unit- supermax style. I have been monitoring New Jersey prisons for 23 years. Although New Jersey has prison gangs, it has never had a gang problem. This trend is being repeated throughout the country, resulting in the increased building of supermax prisons.

Corrections personnel have told me that the nation-wide move to expand the use of isolation is fostered loosely by the guard unions. These unions are contributing heavily to the political campaigns of law and order candidates. Guards feel that these types of units provide a safe working environment. I believe that isolation units also provide them with a place in which to engage in unwitnessed torture.

Add to all of this, the United Nations Treaty positions on the racially biased death penalty, the physical abuse of women in prisons, abuse of the mentally ill, abuse involving prison labor, involuntary human scientific experimentation, violation of children's rights, and your picture of the United States human rights violations continues. All of these practices go on daily in US prisons, and they all fly in the face of at least a dozen and a half of the International Treaties and Covenants to which the United States is a signatory.

Twenty-three years ago, if you would have had interviewed me, I would

have fought the notion of US political prisoner and I would have fought the notion of a prison system, which looks suspiciously like the system of slavery.

The United States now imprisons almost 2 million people, a proportionately larger amount of people than any other country in the world. Between 65 and 85 per cent of those we imprison are people of color. On any given day, one out of four Black males is under some form of social control.

If you are a young male of color in this country, and you are poor, should you get arrested (a very likely occurrence), your bail will be set so high you become an economic hostage. For you, the phrase "innocent until proven guilty" has little meaning. You may sit in a cell for months without having been found guilty of anything. You will certainly not get a fair trial by a jury of your peers. You will be defended by a public defender who has a caseload so vast you cannot possibly be treated as a priority, and finally, you will serve a sentence which is 30 per cent longer than a Caucasian would receive for the same crime. If you have seen the same thing happen to your father, your uncles, your cousins- if you look around at the broader picture of what is happening to men, women, youth, and children of your nationality, it is not hard to conclude that genocide is being committed.

The United Nations definition of genocide is a) the killing of members of a racial or religious group b) the causing of serious bodily harm to members of a particular group c) deliberately inflicting on a group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within that group and e) forcibly transferring children of that group to another group.

If we use this definition, it is not hard to see how the mass imprisonment that is occurring fits that definition. Coupled with data on high infant

mortality, early death of the elderly of color, lack of the same medical treatment, opportunities and education that is afforded to whites, and the realization becomes even more compelling.

The folks in prison are mostly poor and working class people who need jobs and education. Prison issues are class and race issues. The crippling of our poor, of our young people of color in prisons is expanding, and none of this is about the rate of crime. It is about capitalism and it is about racism. It is about a culture of greed and a culture, which fears the joy of diversity.

I want to read you something from a memorandum written by the Investigative Services Unit at Pelican Bay State Prison, a control unit prison in California. In it they are reviewing a prisoners central file, and they comment, "this memorandum refers to the subjects correspondence with Bonnie Kerness who acts as a mail drop for prisoners and militant organizations throughout the United States. The Prison News Service... organized by Bonnie Kerness, has been identified as the newsletter for the Black Guerilla Family..." That memo goes on for three pages with its distortions and mistruth. I have half a dozen other, similar intelligence memos about me from various government entities. I have been followed, and have had men in dark suits sitting outside my house on a number of occasions.

To me, oppression is a very real thing. The FBI has an ongoing program called COINTELPRO, which stands for Counterintelligence Program. That program, which began in the 60's, was designed to disrupt or destroy groups, which the FBI considers to be politically objectionable. I have seen activists and dissidents from my generation killed by the police, the State Troopers, or the National Guard. I've also seen them imprisoned as a result of COINTELPRO. I have seen the lives of their children and family destroyed. It is not surprising to me that those of us that speak out on behalf of prisoners, or in opposition to government

policies, find ourselves under some form of government surveillance.

I believe oppression is a condition common to all of us who are without the power to make the decisions that govern the political, economic, and social life of this country. We are victims of an ideology of inhumanity on which this country was built. I have come to believe that the politics of the police, the politics of the courts, the politics of the prison system, and the politics of the death penalty are the politics of social control. I believe that this affects every one of us in ways that are a call to action.

Each of you is going into a field where you will confront oppressive policies and oppressed people. It would be good if you recognize your own oppression as well. None of us in this room owns the means of production in this country anymore than the homeless person on the streets. I think that whites have to consciously wash off the racism that infects us daily in a society where we are privileged in relation to people of color. Social justice activists have a real stake in tearing down that barrier.

When one looks up the word "oppress," we find that it is to "burden harshly, unjustly, or tyrannically." It is also to "weigh heavily upon the mind or spirit." The practices, which I've described, are clearly designed to disable prisoners through physical, psychological, or spiritual breakdown. My experience leads me to believe that what happens behind prison walls finds its way outside to the larger population.

I have been part of struggle in this country for the past 35 years. I have seen the horror that US government policies can do. I have never seen anything like what I am seeing now in US prisons. I have spent time with US political prisoners. I have spent time with people who have endured torture in US prisons. The wall of silence that has been built around prisoners and prisons has got to be broken down. Prisons are the bottom

line manifestation of how oppression works in this country.

Thomas Jefferson wrote that, "Single acts of tyranny can be ascribed to the accidental opinion of the day, but a series of oppressions, begun at a distinguished period and pursued unalterably through every change in ministers too plainly proves a deliberate, systematical plan of reducing us to slavery."

I'd like to open up for some dialog, questions, or comments.