

Truth  
James Keown

Today is canteen day. Later this morning I will be called to stand in a line to receive a plastic bag filled with items that I ordered last week. Inside the bag will be toothpaste, razors, a bag of coffee, and some packets of oatmeal. When I review my receipt, I will be reminded that I could have bought each of these items for at least 10 percent less money at most grocery stores and that the prices in the canteen have gone up each year of my incarceration, but the pay rates for prisoners have remained unchanged for nearly 30 years. I will also think about how 14 percent of all canteen sales will be funneled back into the Department of Correction's account.

After lunch I will call my mother. The 20 minute call will cost me more than \$2.50. After I hang up the phone, I will consider how the majority of the fee from my calls will flow back to the DDC and how they will use that money to pay the salaries of correctional officers.

I also have a medical appointment today. I twisted my ankle yesterday when I stepped out of the shower. Like people on the outside, I will be charged a co-pay for my visit. Unlike people on the outside, I will have no choice in where I go for treatment, and the co-pay will be equal to two times the average daily pay for a prisoner.

This evening, I will send an email to my sister using the prison's secure messaging system. The message will cost me 25 cents to send, as it will cost for my sister to respond. A private equity firm in Houston will collect all the money from each incoming and outgoing message.

My prison sentence has been strategically monetized by corporate America. Large companies have discovered a way to

nickel and dime many of my daily activities. It seems that every time I turn around, another company is profiting off of my incarceration.

Over the last two decades, the Massachusetts Department of Correction, like most state and federal prison systems, has outsourced basic activities like canteen sales, telephone service, and medical care to third-party vendors. Many of these vendors are public companies that are required to maximize profits for the benefit of their shareholders. While most businesses have their greed checked by their customers' needs, prisoners are a customer base that can go nowhere else. Corporations who prey on incarcerated people are able to focus on squeezing as much money as they can out of prisoners and prisoners' families.

If you examine the modern prison in America today, you will find the results of a Wall Street experiment that has sought to combine the forced labor strategies of slavery with the economic vice grip of company towns. Like the residents of both the plantation and company town, I am a resident who has no choice and no voice.

The motto of Harvard University is Veritas, or Truth. My favorite definition of truth is "sincerity in action, character, and utterance." Since the school was founded on the land John Harvard donated, Harvard University has aspired to serve as both an educational and moral beacon. Harvard has experienced its shortcomings over the years. Edward Holyoke, who served as the school's president in the 1700's, owned slaves. While William Stoughton, for whom Stoughton Hall is named, sent 19 women to their executions during the Salem Witch Trials.

Truth is not easy. It would have been difficult for Holyoke to turn his back on slavery, but it would have been the right thing to do. It would have been unpopular for Stoughton to have

acquitted the innocent women of Salem accused of witchcraft, but again, it would have been the right thing to do. I urge Harvard to do the right thing and show sincerity in action, character, and utterance by ending its relationships with all companies profiting from the Prison Industrial Complex.

Years from now, people will look back on today and view the corporate actions inside of prisons in much the same way we see slavery and witch trials. When these future people ask in future days how people back then could have been so cruel and biased and short-sighted, will they be speaking of Harvard University and its administration? In all truth, I certainly hope not.

[This essay was produced as part of a project to encourage Harvard University to divest from companies that profit from prisons and prisoners.]