

The Sand Castle
James Keown

I am living inside a sand castle. When I look out my window, I can see water lapping around the edges of the sand castle turning everything around me from a soft golden color to an ugly soaked burnt brown. All I can do is wonder how long it will be until the world around me crumbles to the ground. I dream of the sea rescuing me by swallowing me whole and pulling me out into the blue abyss. Will I find peace out there? Will the sea deposit me at the island with the small house that I dream of each day? It is there that I imagine sitting alone with my books and thoughts and words.

Nine years ago I walked into MCI-Norfolk after more than two years at the maximum security prison -- Souza-Baranowski. When I first entered Norfolk, it was like the scene in the Wizard of Oz where the movie goes from black and white to color as Dorothy enters the Emerald City of Oz. The day I entered Norfolk, I found flowers lining the pathways that led to brick and stone buildings that looked more like English row homes than prison units. After spending so much time immersed in the steel, concrete, and barbed wire world of Souza-Baranowski, Norfolk was definitely Oz to me.

For years, Norfolk was thought of as a "privilege prison." The label is an oxymoron. When is it ever a privilege to be in prison? But when compared to other prisons, Norfolk always stood out. It was a place where a person could spend the rest of their days carving out a life for themselves. It was not the free world -- not even close. But, Norfolk was a space where a person who knew that they would most likely never experience true freedom again could exist in a pseudo-society that gave that person a sense of meaning.

Throughout most of the prison's history, a person had to work to get to Norfolk and work to stay. Today, Norfolk is simply another medium security prison -- one of six in the Massachusetts Department of Correction. While it has more programs and activities than some other prisons, Norfolk is a far different

place than it once was.

Norfolk was celebrated as a community prison. Since the 1930s, the community aspect of Norfolk has changed a lot. But through all the changes, a central utilitarian communal identity defined Norfolk -- a belief in maintaining a space that provided the most good to the most people. Today, however, the space has morphed into one that focuses on the lowest common denominator rather than the greater good.

The infusion of modern drugs, like K-2 and Saboxone, and the department's inability to see the drug crisis as anything but a security problem has contributed to the deterioration of the world around me. There is a very real substance use problem inside Norfolk, as there is in prisons and free communities around the country. And much like how urban neighborhoods were ravaged both by the drug epidemic of the 1980s and the ill-informed War on Drugs, Norfolk is now struggling to hold onto the few remaining strands of its once-cherished community identity.

The drug challenge at Norfolk, and the department's response, is only one of several changes over the last few years that has negatively impacted the prison. The culmination of all these points of erosion is that I now start far too many days asking myself: What is the point? What is the point of going to school to tutor? What is the point of engaging in prison and sentencing reform? What is the point of leaving my cell at all? When I look out my window, I see more and more people walking around in zombie-like states -- not just those zombified by drugs, but also those zombified by a lack of purpose, by being disconnected from family and friends, by a lack of hope. I see fewer and fewer staff members who seem to care much beyond an opportunity to make a drug bust or to create a new restrictive policy. I also see fewer and fewer people like me who just want to live a life with some meaning.

Purpose is what one friend tells me allows a person to serve a natural life sentence. Where is my purpose in this chaos? Returning to the example of the substance use challenge, today a set number of men will be called for drug testing; a predictable

percentage will fail. Those who fail will be cycled through the prison's substance use carousel, but will never be given a realistic lifeline to receive effective treatment. Some will cooperate with investigators and give up others who are on the carousel with them in the hopes of gaining some benefit -- but, in truth, these people are just searching for a purpose like the rest of us. And, in response to it all, the administration will make another adjustment to life at Norfolk through a new procedure or changed policy. They will pull a lever here, turn a knob there -- just like the all-powerful Oz. All the time, they will insist that no one look behind the curtain.

All of this plays out just beyond my window as the water draws tighter and tighter around the sand castle where I live. A sand castle is an artificial structure -- the fleeting center of an imaginary kingdom. What real purpose can a person have in an imaginary kingdom? Increasingly, I am finding it difficult to find mine. I desperately want to be positive. Desperately! But, for me it so difficult to find something to be positive about.

I dash from my unit to other buildings each day in the hope of not getting caught in yet another "freeze up." I worry constantly that my life is going to be tossed about (in the case of a shakedown, tossed quite literally) because of the actions of others. It seems that every week another privilege disappears because of a new policy designed to address the "pressing needs" of the institution.

Now when I look around, all I can see is the artificial world in which I live that has a very real impact on those who live in it. I feel overwhelmed by what I see, by everything I regularly experience. It is in these moments of lost purpose, frustration, anger, and anxiety that I dream of a little blue-gray house made of stone hidden on a desolate island. Inside the house stands a half-moon shaped wooden writing desk where I can sit, type, and pour out my heart to no one. Outside the imaginary windows, puffins nest in the rocky rises on the island, which reveals to me that my dream house hides somewhere in the chilly North Atlantic, not in some tropical paradise. Somehow, that

makes the imaginary island seem that much more lonely.

I am living in a sand castle. Water is rising. The walls are crumbling all around me. In desperation, I think of the words of Shakespeare's King Lear, "O, that way madness lies. Let me shun that. No more of that." And, yet, I wonder in which direction madness truly lies these days -- inside the chaos of the sand castle or inside the comfort of my imagination?

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