

Monroe, New York 10950
July 25, 1997

C-Span
400 N. Capital Street
Washington, D.C.

Dear Brian:

I have been following the famous journey of Alexis DeToqueville, avidly, on C-Span. I was particularly moved by the segments aired at Sing-Sing Prison in Ossining, New York. I agree whole heartedly that one can discern much about a society by the way in which a given society treats its citizens convicted of "crimes."

As a social worker by profession, and a liberal Democrat by political choice, I have always been a passionate believer in human rights and civil liberties. I have had a long-standing interest in the American penal system having worked in a youth detention facility, in a ward for the criminally insane, and in a state probation and parole unit.

Repeatedly, I found that incarcerated citizens, both juveniles and adults, were in some ways, the victims of the very society that had incarcerated them. I found that my own spirit became broken working as a professional in attempting to navigate the attitudes regarding citizens convicted of crimes. I also felt that it was socially and politically expedient to label people as either bad or good, and accord them their "due."

I left the penal system and became a substance abuse counselor. I experienced the ravages of alcohol and other drug abuse as a clinician.

And ironically enough, my first cousin, whom I grew up with, became addicted to cocaine. In 1992, he was convicted of possession having had a little over two ounces of cocaine on his person. For this first time, non-violent offense he received a 15 year-life sentence. He had no previous criminal record either as a juvenile or adult. He had steady employment.

Now, the issues of our penal system, drug laws, and civil liberties, have hit close to home. My cousin has spent five years in a maximum security facility with such notables as Lenny Ritkin. My issue is that of mandatory minimum sentences, and letting the punishment fit the crime.

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My cousin has spent over seven years in prison. He can look forward to another ten years. He sleeps on a board with some sort of a stuffed bag thrown over it as a mattress. He is deteriorating mentally, psychologically, and spiritually. With each visit, I see an increasing dazedness in his eyes. He is coming to look and act like a caged animal.

My entire family is tortured by his confinement, and moreover, his 15 year-life imprisonment sentence in a maximum security facility. Had he murdered or raped, he probably would have been paroled by now.

I admire DeToqueville's brilliance in his ability to analyze the nuances of human and civil freedoms. I can only wonder what his comments would be if he could see New York State Rockefeller Drug Laws in action.

Sincerely,

