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the past 30 years, incarceration has increased 600 percent nationwide — even though crime has been declining in the same period.

Crime has also been declining in Europe during that period, and their response has been to reinvision justice and what incarceration looks like. They've instead been thinking in terms of social separation rather than mass incarceration. Someone who commits a crime may need to be socially separated for a while, and that's important to acknowledge. Nobody is saying that we should just unlock the prison doors and let everyone out, but we do need to look at why we choose to throw people away instead of restore offenders, victims, and communities with the goal of bringing every person possible back into society. That's what success looks like; warehousing humans is a failure.

During the period I worked in the prison, I saw neighborhoods of people who were incarcerated, and families that just came to expect their brothers, fathers, and uncles would all be locked up. Having witnessed what I have witnessed on the inside, and seeing communities lose entire sections of the community on the outside, I just can't see the real justice in our current system. We're housing human beings for profit, that's the motivation. I left as a prison abolitionist because the offenders and victims deserve more of a voice in this whole system.

**A.H.:** What does successful, real justice look like?

**J.A.:** A success would be try to understand what's happened, understand why someone or something has been violated, maybe why is someone dead. Figure out how long the offender might need to be socially separated so they are no longer a threat, but by all means eliminate mandatory sentences and reduce sentence lengths. If we were interested in healing communities after a crime our resources

would go toward the needs of victims, and treatment and education of those who committed the crime with the end goal of restoring the entire community, including offenders. Focus on the systemic issues, and figure out how to offer true support and treatment for victims. We also absolutely must engage in the deep hard work of truly acknowledging and addressing systemic racism and classism ever prevalent in our society.

We need to do away with the illusion of retribution, and that's what our system is based on. The entire system is predicated on the lie of retribution. It doesn't correct the problem or act as a deterrent. You don't see healing-you see gaping wounds.

**A.H.:** What is the price of "tough on crime" politicians and 51-year life sentences?

**J.A.:** Well, that's one area in particular where the failure of retribution is most glaring. In Tennessee if you are convicted of first-degree murder, there are three sentencing options: death, life without parole, and life with the possibility of parole. Except that in this state, since 1995, life with the possibility of parole is a mandatory 51 calendar years. When you go back and listen to the tapes of the Judiciary Committee discussing the 51-year life sentences in 1995, they are very clear that they only expect that a prisoner will do at most 40 years because they will simply die in prison.

So there you go, three forms of a death sentence is what we've got with no regard to mitigating circumstances and no chance for redemption. These individuals have some of the lowest rates of recidivism incidentally, and rather than the 51-year life sentences costing an additional \$50 million as anticipated by the legislative members at the time, it's now at an additional \$2 billion and rising. The Tennessee Legislature took the ability away from juries in 1995 to make the determination that an individual should have a second chance. And we're a so-called "Christian" state, how? And also how is concentrating power in big government and

taking away rights of jury members to make just determinations based on the information they've obtained a conservative value?

**A.H.:** Talk about prison abolitionism versus prison reform?

**J.A.:** It's all connected. For an abolitionist, you can't separate these issues. What we're talking about is systemic racism and the blackening of the lower-class regardless of race. If we look at modern mass incarceration as slavery, which I do, as do a lot of abolitionists and the 13th Amendment, then the slavery franchise has definitely been expanding.

We have to address systemic cultural ills. And what isn't working is the current system, current sentencing laws, current levels of incarceration, and the empty logic of throwing a few programs here and there to bring about reforms. Those of us who work to abolish mass incarceration do so through reform. So, to hold them up as an either/or proposition is a false dichotomy. For example, we must deeply reform health care and the quality and the way it's offered in prison. Realizing this reform substantively is a step toward the end of mass incarceration. It does this in part by forcing us to recognize the humanity and value of prisoners as moral agents with a right to decent care, with a right to a future. To this end, the first thing we need to do is get rid of the private health care within the system. That's a huge mistake, just another race to the bottom that in the end costs the taxpayers more by failing to provide adequate health care as it's needed. Reform in the expansion of meaningful programming and education is also key.

I can see where the average person who doesn't understand how education can change people might say, "Well, my God! I had to take out \$70,000 in student loans. Why should this jerk get to go to college for free?" I get that; I took out huge student loans, but I care about what's good and best for our society, and the No. 1 factor in reducing recidivism is education. It will

significantly reduce crime, and it's a lot cheaper than putting people back in prison.

**A.H.:** What surprised you most about the inmates you came to know?

**J.A.:** There are people who are afraid of prisoners because that's the dominant narrative in our culture. Prisons are designed to keep outsiders away just as much as to keep offenders in. Without exception in the five years that I was there as chaplain, people would come in to work with prisoners, enter into relationships, build community, and they were overwhelmed by the realization that it was not like what they expected. You find love, compassion, humility.

**A.H.:** Some might say it's impossible to change the system because people don't quite understand why we would need to.

**J.A.:** Well I'd say it's important to understand that it's not us against them. It's in the interest of society as a whole to not pit everyone against each other—even those who have become offenders. Everyone wins with the abolition of our current prison system — except for the economic interest of private prisons and the private corporations who profit from mass incarceration.

I'm a realist and pragmatic, but I also know we have options. Not only is it not impossible to change the current system; it's inevitable. Who would have thought that we as a country would be this far with gay marriage? How long are we going to keep company with countries like Russia, Iran and China on prison policies while the rest of Western civilization shakes its head in disbelief at our willingness to throw our citizens away? Mass incarceration today is the biggest stain on American culture since slavery. This is the civil rights issue of our day.

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