



Affiliated with the Kwan Um School of Zen

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A Drive Into the Now

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November 14, 2004

We are not dealing with the great social issues of the day. Instead, we criminalize our failures and relegate the non-conformists to the jails and prisons of our nation. We dream that by criminalizing our failures the issues will somehow vanish. The end result is an exploding prison population with its own catastrophic consequences.

Part of the legacy we bequeath our children is likely to be a nation of razor wire, jails and prisons in which the rites of passage from childhood to adult life will include felony convictions, prison time, parole and probation.

Find it hard to believe? Take a drive with me. The point of this tour is to highlight the explosion in the prison population in the last 15 years and some the related consequences. Throughout the drive, bear in mind that what you see only represents a portion of what is going on in an eighty-mile radius of Gainesville.

From Gainesville, go south on interstate I-75 to exit 321 and follow the signs for about 8 miles till you arrive at FCC Coleman. This federal prison complex opened in 1995 and is designed to house about 7,000 men and women; it has a work camp, two prisons and two penitentiaries. Coleman is the largest prison complex in the USA.

Located in the medium security prison is an inmate named Veronza Bower who served a 30-year sentence with a mandatory release date of April 7, 2004. It appears the government cannot figure out when and if he should be released. The U.S. Federal Court in Ocala, Florida ordered a hearing by December 24, 2004 regarding Veronza Bowers, Jr. Writ of Habeas Corpus challenging his illegal detention and denial of a mandatory parole hearing by the U.S. Parole Commission.

We return to I-75, go north for 37 miles to exit 358 and east to the light at highway 25A. Turn left at 25A and go north for about 7 miles to the Florida Department of Correction complex at Marion.

Here we will find a county juvenile facility on the left, a road camp and a men's prison on the right, and a little further north on the left is Lowell Correctional Institution (CI), a women's prison.

At the women's prison will notice a new blue building. This is the future: The state is expanding its prison capacity by infilling existing compounds with these permanent structures instead of building new prisons.

Now we backtrack to I-75 and go north to US 90 at Lake City. We drive west on 90 through Lake City and past the airport. On our right we find two prisons: Columbia CI and Lakeland CI, built in 1992 and 1997 respectively. A few miles down the road on the right is Baker CI, built in 1981

The questions to ask here is which prison is the private for profit prison and which is the prison designated to hold male youthful offenders?

At Baker turn around and head back a mile to the last light. Then turn south on SR 231. Go through Lake Butler until you arrive at the Reception and Medical Center on the right. Here you have a prison medical center and in-processing complex employing over 900 people and handling over 2,000 inmates.

Do a U turn and head north till you get to the stoplight, which is SR 121, and turn right (East). Go till you hit SR 16. Take a right and you will soon come up on Union CI.

Here are about 1,549 inmates, including those on Death Row. Death Row housing was built in 1992 and is full; the overflow is held at Florida State Prison. The death row cell is a 9 x 6 x 9.5 foot cage with a steel bunk, commode and sink. A lot of men have spent 20 or more years in such a cage.



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Frank Smith spent the last ten years of his life as an innocent man on death row and died there of cancer. He was exonerated a year after his death through the efforts of his sister.

Florida State Prison is the next stop to the South. It not only holds the state's execution chamber but also is the central prison for inmates with serious psychological problems. Here you will also see a new feature associated with maximum-security units: In front of the prison are individual cages similar to dog runs, not much bigger than a cell, where inmates get fresh air and exercise.

Florida State Prison is where Frankie Valdez died on July 17, 1999. The State's Attorney called his death a murder by correction officers, but has been unwilling or unable to get a conviction.

We pass two more prisons New River East and New River West as we head south back to Gainesville by US 301.

We complete our journey at the intersection of Waldo Road and 39th Avenue in Gainesville. Here we take a left and head east on 39th Avenue. Beginning at the turn, we find a mile of prison-related facilities on the right. The facilities here hold over 1,500 state and county inmates in various stages and forms of incarceration. This complex has a state prison on one end and the Alachua County jail at the other.

In 1994, a new jail was opened in Alachua County with a 920-bed capacity. There was a 450 inmate monthly average in the first year's operation. However, by June of 2003 the safe operating capacity of 782 inmates had been exceeded with an inmate population of 1,003 men and women. In January 2004, the county doubled its active courtroom capacity without any increases in jail capacity. In April of 2004, the jail population reached 1,133 inmates.

On our journey in to the now, we have seen jails and prisons that house over 15,000 men, women and children. Fifteen years ago, there were less than 8,500 men, women and children housed in less than half the prisons that you saw today.

The cases of Frankie Valdez, Frank Smith, and Veronza Bowers may seem like aberrations, but they represent dangerous precedents for others to develop..

You can argue these are acceptable consequences for "getting tuff" on crime or our failed social experiments. However, the truth is that 7 out of 10 felons are re-incarcerated within 3 years after their release and that one in twenty of those born today will become a convicted felon. Now, you tell me, what part of this equation is working?

Is this the legacy we pass on to our children?