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Animals in Prison: Is there value in inmate-animal rehabilitation programs?

I.

The prison yard siren went off alerting us it was time to head back inside. My groundhog pal Moe began waddling away. I kept hoping he would turn back offering some sort of sign I would be missed, but this isn't Hollywood. The rain hid the tears that refused to be dammed. I wasn't sad, per se, I just let myself feel something for the first time since I arrived to SavageVille and my heart burst.

I shared parts of that story at a group therapy session, when the kindly, old counselor with the tight hair bun and glasses so thick they that should be able to see into the future went around the room asking us to share about the last time we cried. That was, and has been, my one and only prison rehabilitation offering—I guess they figured I was healed—which is why I rolled my eyes as I read the fine print on the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) memo posted in the Dayroom. It read:

IDOC Statement of Purpose: The mission of the IDOC is to serve justice in Illinois and increase public safety by promoting positive change in individuals in custody behavior, operating successful reentry programs, and reducing victimization [emphasis mine].

Agency Vision: Reduce recidivism by offering seamless, efficient services that are geared toward Individual in Custody rehabilitation.

(IDOC Individual in Custody Orientation Manual 4)

Those words are posted all over the prison including the visitor's entrance. An Augustana College Professor of Religion, Dr. Mahn, who teaches at my prison, eloquently elaborates on this point in an academic blog post, "The mission statement of the Department of Corrections posted by the metal detectors at EMCC speaks of rehabilitation and reentry. But most incarcerated people have few opportunities to use the time they are 'doing' productively—to say nothing of...personal transformation. Many of them are hungry—starving, really—for the chance to learn, to grow, to become something other and better than 'the system' tries to make them believe that they are" (n.p.). The closest thing I've come to real rehabilitation in prison was meeting a pigeon named Buddy and a marmot named Moe. In many real ways, they helped me survive this place.

The human-animal bond provides positive results in various situations like helping the elderly combat loneliness, returning vets alleviate PTSD symptoms, and bringing the biggest, widest smiles you'll ever see to cancer-stricken kids. I wondered if animals couldn't help inmates cope with the challenges of incarceration and if those skills wouldn't lead to other benefits; and if that were true, should official inmate-animal programs be more emphasized in discussions about inmate rehabilitation programming? This is a question I hope more people will begin asking, but first, some context.

In medical circles rehabilitation means restoring someone to a previous state, but in the case of someone with criminal thinking that definition feels counter-productive. For our

purposes, and the typical definition in criminal justice circles, rehabilitation means restoring someone to useful citizenry. It seems obvious that inmate rehabilitation should be about changing mindsets, healing past traumas, addressing mental health and addiction issues; and/or preparing inmates for productive citizenship upon release or practical things like getting a job, building healthy relationships, etc., but inmate rehabilitation has a complex history.

The US has a history of shifting its ideology from prison as a place for punishment to prison as a place for rehabilitation. According to scholar and criminal justice expert Kendra N. Bowen in *The Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, early US prison policy ignored inmate rehabilitation programming as an option—prison was meant as a type of revenge or retribution—which is why so many still hold to the “eye for an eye” view of prison. Bowen explains that, inmate rehabilitation programming began in the 1930s when President Hoover’s Wickersham Commission declared that the current prison policy hurt society and probably made convicts more dangerous upon their release back to communities. The punitive non-rehabilitation approach converted prisons into Con U., places that taught convicts how to become better criminals. A new approach was adopted focusing on trying to help convicts address issues that landed them in prison. Unfortunately, in the 60s, as crime increased, society shifted back towards the revenge/punishment model—a cycle we will see repeated over and over in America. New tough on crime legislation in the 80s and early 90s packed prisons to overcapacity before studies showed that the get-tough approach wasn’t reducing crime or recidivism. By the late 90s, after various studies were published, most US prisons returned to the strategy of rehabilitation as a large-scale initiative, and we’ve been riding that wave ever since. Yet ask most inmates and they’ll tell you, in practice, inmate rehabilitation is mostly P.R. spin and lip service. Inmate rehabilitation is not prioritized and thus it’s not surprising recidivism rates still hover around a

ridiculous 70-80% within three years of release. New, fresh, bold ideas are necessary if we are to reverse course. Could animal-inmate programming be one of those bold new ideas? Join me as we look into one specific example of an inmate/animal relationship at a prison commonly known as SavageVille.

II.

Maximum security Statesville Correctional Center in Crestwood, IL (aka SavageVille) was my first home upon initial incarceration. Within weeks I'd seen the prison tactical team beat my neighbor bloody with bat-sized batons for daring to request an extra roll of toilet paper. I saw someone else dragged out of their cell unconscious with a trail of blood coming from their rear end. SavageVille, living up to every bit of its moniker. I kept to myself. Laced-up. Body like a clenched fist. I refused visits and rarely called home. I kept falling deeper into the well, losing the light, until a pigeon came into my life.

Buddy, a fluffy grey and white pigeon with a large white spolt on his tiny beak, lived in the rafters of my prison wing. "Did you know," I told my cellmate C-section (nicknamed because they say his head is so big he needs a prescription pillow and his mom won't visit him because she's still mad he destroyed her figure), "Americans domesticated pigeons." We raced them and used them to communicate via long distances, pre-telephones. People cared and loved them like pets until technology made them obsolete and we threw them away, but fully domesticated pigeons die quickly in the wild so they live in cities—to be near us. We call them flying rats and shoo them away, but their instincts tell them to trust us, so they come up to us and beg for food. They love us and we hate them, but Buddy was my buddy.

It struck me that Buddy seemed so content, even happy (if one can gauge pigeon emotions) to be in prison. He reminded me of DH Lawrence's poem "Self-Pity," "I never saw a wild thing/sorry for itself. / A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough / Without ever having felt sorry for itself" (n.p.). My winged companion listened patiently as I explained and complained about all the brokenness in prison, the smell, the noise, and the fights. He became my trusty therapist. He never judged even as I told him I'd considered the easy way out, the coward's solution. I knew. But one can only fall so deep into the well before being consumed by the darkness. Feeding Buddy became why I put off my plans. *Who would feed him?* I worried.

I'm not unique in my suicide contemplation in prison. Criminal justice expert Ann Carson, from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, noted suicides increased 85% in state prisons from 2001-2019 (n.p.). However, I don't need a body of research to tell me what I see firsthand: mental health issues in prisons are emblematic of a system overwhelmed and out of control. Sociologists and researchers Gonzalez and Connell clearly illustrate this point in their analysis, "some studies report that at least half of male inmates...report symptoms of mental health conditions" (2328-2333). Every inmate would benefit from mental health services. This mindwarp will change anyone the only question is how much damage can you endure before being permanently destroyed. There are neither physically enough therapists nor the budget to hire the necessary staff. According to a recent lengthy *New York Times* investigative feature piece, the US jail and prison system is the largest provider of mental health treatment in the nation and yet these facilities are "dangerously unequipped to provide adequate treatment to incarcerated people with mental health issues" (qtd. in Vogel, n.p.). It's clear to this author that bold new ideas and creative solutions must be sought like say, animals in prison.

Studies show animal interactions and ownership--especially dogs, the empathy super heroes in the animal community--help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Prison journalist Charlotte West wrote in her piece “Behind bars, women in Washington learn to care for pets—and themselves” about this very point:

Pets help reduce stress and anxiety, encourage people to be physically active, and increase social connections, according to a March 2024 survey from the American Psychiatric Association and the American Veterinary Medical Association. Experts say that animals may also help in drug and alcohol recovery, as well as those experiencing depression and other psychiatric conditions. (2)

I know the kind of joy and peace dogs bring to a tortured soul. I grew up in a tough neighborhood as a bit of nerd built like a wet noodle with two open car doors for ears. Desperate for friends, I would often dog-nap the neighborhood mutts to play veterinarian. My folks often found me bandaging the neighbor’s Schnauzer in our basement. I’d bring home strays and hide them in my closet. Now, 20 years later, in the unlikeliest of places, I would finally get a pet of my own.

III.

Anyone who’s done time at SavageVille knew the Stooges. Inmate writer Dole mentioned them in a *Life Inside* article published in collaboration with *Vice Magazine*, “My Best Friends in Prison are Frogs, Turtles, and Raccoons.” He reports, “I arrived at Statesville Correctional Center...it does have at least one fox, though, and groundhogs. We feed the groundhogs daily, which makes them incredibly fat” (n.p.). The first time I saw Moe, Larry, and Curly, they looked skinny. I learned they lost a third of their body weight after hibernating from

October through March. They often stand statue-still reared up on their hind legs as they survey the grounds for potential danger. If they spot an enemy they let out a high-pitched warning whistle, hence another name they go by: whistle pigs. They're also called woodchucks, although they don't actually chuck wood.

One morning at yard, I walked in the brisk spring air listening to the Boss croon about his Glory Days and sipping my cup of joe when the Stooges magically appeared. I sat down no more than fifty yards from them. They ignored me. I called to them. They ignored me. I looked away for an instant and Larry (because he has a mess of head fur) disappeared into the ground. Groundhogs dig tunnels five feet deep and thirty feet long with multiple entrances and exits, even separate chambers to use as bathrooms. Curly (because he barely had any head fur) licked himself like a cat before also disappearing into one of the tunnels. Moe (because it seemed he was in charge) turned my way and began to waddle over. He looked like an Ewok, especially the round ears. Keim, a groundhog behavioral researcher studying the community habits of groundhogs, described one of her groundhogs scarily similar to Moe, "sleek, sturdy, with small serious eyes, delicate whiskers, and fur that shaded from auburn on her broad chest to a mélange of chestnut, straw and russet across the rest of her body" (n.p.).

Moe made eye contact, a part of me tensed, the size of his four gleaming white incisors seemed to grow exponentially with every step. Moe hesitated as if he sensed my fear. I took a deep breath and trusted C-section's assurances, "They'll eat right out of your hand." Moe stood on his hind legs and sniffed at me as if to say, *Where are the snacks, dude?* He begged without a whiff of self-awareness or shame, just out on a lovely morning looking for a snack. The yard siren went off and I looked off towards the guard shack. When I turned around Moe had already waddled away. As I headed back toward my building, I began to make mental notes: I needed

peanut butter packets and fruit and veggies...I may even buy some “exclusive” produce off the inmate black market. I wondered if groundhogs liked onions? I needed some research done. I’d call my family tonight, I decided. I was excited. Thoughts about hurting myself began to dwindle.

IV.

The idea that this interaction with a groundhog had affected me so deeply made me wonder what other affects animals might have on inmates. Shouldn’t rehabilitation programs go beyond the question of, “Does it reduce recidivism?” to include programs that actually help inmates mentally and emotionally? What if they did more? What if inmate programs could go beyond these walls and benefit society directly by say, helping empower special needs individuals? Or inside these walls: What if they reduced inmate-officer and inmate-inmate violent incidents? What if they worked as a release valve for all the pressure in prison? What if they offered vocational training and employment opportunities upon release? What if they went beyond changing behavior to changing the very identity of an inmate? Could such a program exist? What if they weren’t official programs at all and simply existed in secret inmate-animal interactions?

In journalist Corrine Ramey’s piece, “Tiger the Cat Finds a Home at Sing Sing,” Ramey writes about the last tabby cat left living among inmates at the notoriously dangerous Sing Sing prison. The point of her story is best illustrated in her quote of filmmaker David Hoffman who taught drama at the prison, “The sweetness of the way inmates treated the animals was beautiful to me...some of the most hardened inmates were totally antisocial and hated other people, but you would see them caring for these cats” (n.p.). The only brutality in the article comes from someone wearing a different uniform. A Sing Sing correctional officer found a box of kittens at

the prison and ordered an inmate to kill them. When the inmate refused, the officer threw the kittens into the trash compactor. The guard was prosecuted and sentenced to a year in prison.

Another article about cats in prison comes from reporter Jack Nicas, “Cats Filled the Prison. Then the Inmates Fell in Love.” He reports on cats living among inmates in Chile’s oldest and most overcrowded prison. Nicas quotes the prison’s warden, Col. Helen Leal Gonzalez, “Prisons are hostile places...so of course, when you see there’s an animal giving affection and generating these positive feelings, it logically causes a change in behavior, a change in mindset...the cats provide something invaluable in a lockup notorious for overcrowding and squalid conditions: love, affection and acceptance” (n.p.). Was the cats’ presence really tied with helping keep the prison under control? From prisons around the world a similar pattern was developing.

A handful of unique animal-inmate programs exist around the world. According to the article “Australian prison provides rehabilitation for inmates and animals,” an outback prison houses a wildlife center where inmates care for injured or abandoned “kangaroos, emus, wombats, snakes, and cockatoos,” among others (n.p.). A senior wildlife officer explains their effect on the inmate community, “Animals show that (love and respect) unconditionally, they don’t judge.... It’s a real positive impact and the animals can actually sometimes help people heal...the scheme instils a sense of responsibility and develops life skills for offenders preparing for the outside world” (n.p.). Beyond psychological advantages, there are many pragmatic benefits to these programs. Many inmates volunteering in animal programs learn valuable skills that lead to jobs upon release. In Australia, many inmates secured jobs in wildlife work upon release.

Here in the US, various prisons in the southwest started programs allowing inmates to train untamed mustangs in order to cull wild populations and get them ready for public sale. *Men's Journal* contributor Noah Gallagher Shannon writes in "Breaking Point" about the positive influence horses seem to have on the inmates participating in the program. "It [the horse program] boasts a 15 percent recidivism rate compared with the 70 percent national average. This likely owes to the fact that unlike other prison gigs, training horse offers discipline and freedom in equal measure" (24). It's clear there's a reciprocal relationship between the inmates helping animals, and, in turn, animals helping inmates. In my case, I assure you, the Stooges helped me more than I did them.

V.

I'd spent months building my relationship with the Stooges, primarily Moe. I'd meet them at the yard next to a small knoll by the northernmost wall. I imagine they picked up on my scent and communicated among themselves via the scent sacs located under their forelegs and near their anus. I fed them veggie scraps and the occasional peanut butter packet. I worried about their weight. They were packing on pounds quickly. Who knows how many other inmates fed them? Moe was borderline domesticated. He allowed me to pat him on the head while he ate. His fur gruffy, tough to the touch, but what a thrill to pet a wild animal. I made him a makeshift leash from a couple of shoelaces, and once made it almost ten steps before he gave up. Moe, the smallest, nicest, and I presumed youngest of the bunch (since groundhogs tend to get grouchier with age) became my ready friend. The Stooges, likely females (as only female groundhogs live in small, related clans) gave the impression of a family unit. I wondered if I shouldn't start calling Moe by the more appropriate name, Moesha? I spent that first year in prison obsessed with groundhogs.

Officers and inmates alike began to call me the groundhog whisperer. They would come by my cell and donate fruit or fresh “exclusive” vegetables not available at Chow. I became friends with a small group of like-minded animal lovers and we often exchanged info and updates on our encounters with the Stooges. Life in prison fell into a semblance of normality. I felt my body unclenching.

In the last week of August that first year, a wicked summer storm blew through the prison, knocking out the power and flooding the decks. On a Level One lockdown and unable to leave my cell, I worried about the Stooges. *Can they forage for themselves?* I wondered. In the wild they only live two to four years, but in captivity they can live up to three times longer. My nerves gave into my demons. I made some prison hooch out of the rotting fruit I had saved for them. The next morning, much to my surprise, they called yard early. I was still hurting from the previous festivities, but I got myself together and stumbled out into the blazing sun. Moe stood waiting for me, but I tripped and almost crushed her as I approached. She jetted off and refused to return for the rest of the day. I never drank again.

Later that summer, I learned about a new dog program available at Shawnee CC; I put in for a transfer immediately. A part of me worried about leaving the Stooges, but reasoned I was leaving them in good hands. I imagined the wonder of sharing a cell with a cute Lab puppy and training him to be a therapy dog. I read about the program and its various accolades.

Writer Roxanne Squire reports in “Illinois Correctional Center Inmates Training Dogs to Help Veterans” about this program that teaches inmates how to train pups to become therapy dogs for veterans suffering from PTSD. The inmates even build their dogs temporary quarters. She notes, “It’s an inspiring way to work on simultaneous rehabilitation for both inmates and military veterans dealing with post-traumatic stresses of combat” (n.p.). In a U of Illinois

Veterinary School blog, third year vet student and Shawnee prison dog program volunteer Dria Talley writes, “Living with dogs changes the behavior of everyone that interacts with them. The dogs help alleviate tensions and give the inmates an outlet to be creative and kind.... the offenders are getting into fewer fights...doing better in studies” (n.p.). I imagined how lucky and cool it would be to participate in a program that not only gave me something important and valuable to achieve, but maybe a job as a dog trainer upon release. Despite all of the benefits, only 30 out of 30,000 male inmates in Illinois participate in human-animal programming. It’s clear animal interactions in prison have value, but do they address the most important marker for political forces when considering prison rehabilitation programming, recidivism?

VI.

Dog programs in prison consistently show decreased recidivism rates among program participants. In the article about the cats in the Chilean prison, Nica quotes a meta study of 20 dog prison programs from around the world. He notes researcher Beatriz Villafaina-Dominguez’s summary of the results, “a decrease in recidivism, improved empathy, improved social skills and a safer and more positive relationships between inmates and prison officials” (n.p.). According to journalist Hilda Burke’s piece, “Pets in prison: the rescue dogs teaching Californian inmates trust and responsibility,” one Californian prison dog program cites a zero (!) percent recidivism rate for ex-offenders who had participated in the program (n.p.). Prison administrations should be ecstatic about these recidivism statistics as they also consider lowering recidivism rates important when evaluating potential inmate programming. But are these animal programs lower recidivism rates just a byproduct of larger psychological healing at work inside offenders?

Dog programs offer more than lower recidivism rates or job prospects, they offer life-changing psychological healing. Burke notes changes in the character and identity of program-participating inmates, “having the experience of people believing in them, learning that they’re innately worthy and, crucially, lovable, are for many of these men new and life-changing concepts” (n.p.). Rehabilitation, more than a simple shift in thinking, is a whole new way of seeing and interacting with the world. This reminds me of my favorite metaphor for inmate rehabilitation from Augustana College Chaplain Melinda Papillo. During a recent Zoom with my Religion class, she explained her view of rehabilitation as like a parent scooping up an unruly child and holding them close to protect them from hurting themselves or others. “They will hold them in love until the children calm down and re-center themselves.” In the absence of that loving embrace, maybe some inmates find a similar unconditional love in the animals left in their care. But not everyone is sold on inmate-animal programming.

Some argue these programs waste time. Yet we know inmates have trained thousands of dogs to help veterans suffering from PTSD, disabled people live with dignity, the elderly combat loneliness, and families adopt safe, socialized dogs—there are countless examples of these inmate trained dogs and horses changing lives for the better, sometimes even saving them. Others argue inmates don’t deserve “pets” in prison. In response to them, I’d quote columnist Sharon Dierberger in her piece, “New Tricks,” about just such a skeptic:

Dyan Larson works for Can Do Canines as a dog instructor at three Wisconsin prisons. She was initially skeptical about the program, believing prisoners should pay for their crimes, not play with dogs. But now, she tears up talking about the work they do. She’s seen inmates change, becoming more compassionate and patient, better fathers, and husbands, more respectable, more respectful. They see the dogs blossom under their care

and attention, and that spills over to how they treat others. Success with the dogs seems to spark inmates' desire for success in other areas of their lives. (63)

In another piece, a correctional officer union rep warned about the increased workload for the guards or the possibility of inmates training the dogs to attack the guards. (Fact check: no such attack has ever been reported.) I could share with the union rep all the research and quotes I've found from prison psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, prison officials, think tank leaders, animal program workers, volunteers and current and past inmate program participants--all of which point to the same conclusion: animal programs in prison show positive results on various levels from the personal to the communal. But maybe a quote from Dria's University of Illinois blog about a guard's experience at Shawnee CC might help them understand, "The guard, an intimidating man in his 50s, even shed a few tears when he told us about the changes he has seen in the inmates. It was extremely moving, and I guarantee there was not a single dry eye in the room" (n.p.). Inmate-animal dog programs, and also animals outside of organized programs, in prison consistently show positive results.

VII.

The weather turned. Unfortunately, I didn't get accepted into the dog program. Instead I was approved to transfer to Dixon CC. The Stooges, putting on pre-hibernation weight, easily weighed fifteen plus pounds each by now. I spoke to the Stooge Crew and let them know I would be leaving. C-section promised to keep feeding Buddy, "against his better judgement," he said. He talked a tough game, but I caught him feeding Buddy a few times when he thought I was out of sight. I think the story about how we discarded pigeons struck a chord with him.

I got word I would be on the next transfer bus. In the pouring rain, I went out to yard with my last peanut butter packets and let the Stooges go wild. Their tiny hands squeezing the packets still brought me joy no amount of words can convey. I explained to their bright curious eyes that I would be leaving and something got stuck in my throat. Of course, they could care less. I knew they couldn't understand me. Then the yard siren blared, and I watched my friends waddle back to their dens.

Two days later, I arrived to Dixon CC. In Receiving, my new cellmate told me I'd see deer through the fence (no more wall!) next to the woods adjacent to the prison grounds. Blue Jays, Cardinals and all manner of birds lived in the many trees scattered around the prison yard (trees?!), and a few groundhogs lived in the northeast corner of the yard.

VIII.

I believe the research proves inmate-animal interactions in prisons have positive and far-reaching benefits to multiple stakeholders offering a viable rehabilitation approach that would, among many other benefits, reduce recidivism, making society safer. Inmate-animal programs contribute to positive mental health which can lead to reduced suicide attempts, and reduced drug use, reduced violence (inmate-inmate and inmate-officer), making prison safer and cheaper to operate. These programs create jobs and reduce recidivism. They contribute to society by providing trained animals to families or those in need. They change the very identity of a person in custody away from criminal thinking which in turn makes the public safer when they return to society.

All of this research begs the question, why aren't prisons instituting these programs nationwide? Because some might argue that human-animal inmate programs feel "soft" on

crime? Because politicians feel human-animal inmate programs may be a hard sell to the public versus more mainstream ideas like drug rehabilitation or anger management classes? I don't know. I do know that inmate rehabilitation in fulfillment of its stated mission should result in creating a safer society and I believe that human-animal programs help get us to that end.

Maybe these type of animal programs are underutilized because inmate-animal programs don't fit neatly into some category like education/vocational, therapeutic, or because they don't address specific issues like substance abuse or domestic abuse. The reality is inmate-animal programs have a cross-over effect and thus fall into multiple categories, offering multiple benefits.

Interestingly, enough dogs live in shelters today to give every man, woman, and child in detention a companion dog to train or socialize. I envision a future where either wildlife refuges or animal shelters are housed out of prisons. In some research, prisons found ways to make their animal programs profitable. Has a viable inmate rehabilitation option been staring its big brown eyes at us this whole time?

I know an effort of this magnitude would be difficult, even painful, at first, but I also know that beauty and a certain type of freedom can be found on the other side of pain...if only we muster the courage to try.

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