

Steel Reflections

This is my interpretation of how the experiment quickly broke the prisoners down and left them feeling alone and empty. I also focused heavily on how the psychological approaches to torturing the prisoners affected them, and considered the breaking points in the men when they completely surrendered to being a prisoner with no rights. The journal is based on the perspective of prisoner 819, a man permanently scarred by his few days here.

Isolated; Dehumanized
Sunday August 14, 1971

My first day in prison. I cannot explain how horrible actually being in a prison must be. I was stripped of myself the moment I was put in the back of the cop car. My morning blended together, as if I have already forgotten what it was like to move around on my own free will. With my body pressed against the hot metal of the car, I was searched, handcuffed, and then thrown into the back seat, sirens wailing. Soon I was only numbers, prints, and documents. Then I was stripped naked, head shaved, deloused and cleaned by the guards. Looking around, I noticed all of the other naked bodies looked just like mine. These men were all white, about my age, and in good health. So why did I feel so isolated from them? So alone? The guards reminded me of myself too, but there was a clear division between us and them already. I had thought that this experiment would be easy money, thought I would pretend to act how I envisioned a prisoner would for the results they wanted. But my gut quickly told me that this would catch me off guard. Something didn't feel right already, and it's only the first night. I thought to myself that if I want to survive the next 2 weeks, I was going to need friends.

So, I tried to stand out. I tried to be myself as much as I could, even in a gown that made me look like a woman. I tried showing that this experiment a joke to me, that I wasn't scared of the guards. The guards did not appreciate this, and neither did the other prisoners. Most of them had a glum look upon their face, the light that was there yesterday now diminished. They

just looked at me. They looked tranced. 50 pushups in, with a guards foot resting on my back, I decided that maybe finding friends wasn't worth this. I don't know how I mustered up the strength to do 113 pushups today, but all I know is I have never been this physically--or mentally-- exhausted in all of my life. I hope blending in will be easier.

Joining the Rebellion
Monday August 15, 1971

I heard shouting and was suddenly awoken from my not so deep sleep last night. The guards decided 2:30 in the morning is the best time for us to learn our numbers. I half thanked the guards; for reminding me I wasn't alone, but cursed them for the ridiculousness. My sleep on the stiff cot had felt short, yet it was a long few hours where every time I shifted, the cold chain around my ankle knocked against the other. My body was asleep, but my mind was not. It was running with thoughts that scared me: What if I never got let out? What if I get hurt? Where is everyone else? I realized I had welcomed the abrupt wake up because it saved me from my mind. I may not have said a word besides shouting my four numbers--819-- that I know I will never forget, but listening to and hearing the sharp crisp numbers the men next to me yelled eased my mind, at least for the rest of the night.

The morning schedule--wake up, stand up, look up, yell your numbers-- comprised of all the same elements as the other check-ins, except with the addition of the wake up. I was surprised when I awoke ready to accept prison life, but all I heard was silence around me. I hesitated before lifting the thin grimy sheet off me, and as I did the screams erupted. The thin walls shook, and I heard metal on metal. A rebellion. I don't know when this was planned, or how I, who tried to stand out as the rebellious type yesterday, wasn't approached about it. The other prisoners were refusing to yell their numbers, and trying to lock themselves in their cells. Within moments I found myself doing the same, apparently suddenly afraid to stick out, worried

it would turn the others against me instead. Funny, as I had been so concerned to stick out for companionship just the day before. I grunted while I pushed my bed up against the bars, and wondered the opposite of the day before: was conforming worth the punishment I would surely face? Apparently as my mind never tried to stop my body's action. Before I knew what to do next, I heard the off-duty guards run in, feet pounding on the cold concrete so they resembled a stampede, and the sound of clanging of keys into the cells. I was terrified and knew I had made a mistake, but it was too late. I was already being sprayed straight in the face with an icy blast from a fire-extinguisher. Soon it was one on one. Us against the guards. Only we stood there naked, helpless, and ashamed as we were harassed. Between the blows, I can remember watching two prisoners get escorted away. I can only hope for the best for them, as they did not return to their cells for lockup tonight.

Somehow I survived today, I don't really know how. I have never felt this alone in my entire life. I am afraid to look up from the ground in fear of the guards thinking I am rebelling or conspiring with another prisoner. I try to remind myself that this is an experiment, but I cannot. I am convinced I will be here forever. The guards have full control of us all. All I do is obey, but I am still punished. Their job is to make sure I don't escape, and there is no thought in my mind of even trying that, so I don't understand why they are behaving so maliciously. I had to be escorted to the bathroom at night, and sometimes I was simply not allowed to go. Just hours before I had thought these men were similar to me, and now we could not be more opposite it appeared.

Tonight the first prisoner was released. He was, as they told us, "suffering from acute emotional disturbance". As if we all weren't. I have uncontrollable emotions; rage, fear, chaotic thinking. He had been like that since the moment we were locked up though, and it took the guards and intendants this long to believe he wasn't just messing with them.

Special Privileges

Tuesday August 16, 1971

I would feel awfully guilty by recalling my sleepless night, but I must. My thoughts darted as I worked myself into an anxiety attack. Sweating profusely, I walked around the cell for at least an hour, with the heavy summer air filling my lungs slowly, before being released even heavier than before. The attack subsided, but my thoughts never dissipated. I was scared. I was alone. The 8 others who felt and looked so similar to me two days ago seemed so distant. Who was I?

I was special, apparently. Murmurs got around at breakfast that I was one of three prisoners who had a bed to sleep in last night, which is why I feel guilty confessing that I barely slept. I now felt more isolated than ever before, fearing the thought of the others turning against me, but at the same time some of my troubles diminished. Did the guards favor me? I weighed the pros and cons of this notion and decided that there had to be a reason I was permitted a bed, a shower, and a bathroom when others were deprived. It had to be because of yesterday's rebellion. I had the least amount of involvement. Giddy that something that upset me the day before could now be my saving grace for the next 10 days, I went about my tasks as close to normal me as I had been since my arrest.

Today we were all forced to shower, shave, and clean the prison before our visitors arrived. After a large meal by prison standards, we were each allowed 10 minutes with our guests. My mom interrogated me. She was worried. My numb and empty answers frustrated her and even further concerned her. She was not eased when the warden questioned my ability to function. It was my fault that I was tired. My fault I could not show love and affection for my mother like I could a week ago. My fault that I was in the prison. As she was ushered out of the visitor room by the guard she profusely apologized about me, now convinced the state I was in was of my own doings. I don't think they are wrong anymore. It was my fault.

I didn't even return back to my cell before I had a bag over my head. Clangs and shouts were all that guided me in the dark. We were all chained together, being moved for some reason. Soon it became clear we were all in a room together, us and the guards. I felt another anxiety attack coming up. Were we going to be left in here to starve? Or mass murdered? Why else would

we have been moved? Then I heard the guards bark insults at us, curse us out for trying to escape, calling 8612, the one released last night, a fake and a liar. I had never heard of anyone trying to escape. Were they messing with us? Still worried, I focused on my breathing, and focused on my hate for the guards. Why are they doing this to us?

When the bag was taken off my head I found myself back in my cell, unaware of where the others were or just how long I stood being yelled at today. Practically collapsing, the stiff cot in my cell was the only thing I wanted it. I wanted it more than I wanted my life back, but I don't think I will ever get that back. This was a real prison.

Why? What did I do?

Wednesday August 17, 1971

Now I am confused. I'm furious at myself. Furious as I read my complaints of not being able to sleep last night. Furious for thinking I had somehow befriended the guards. I am sitting on the cement, gagging at the smell of my urine and feces that wafts through the air and lingers throughout the prison. I don't know what I did wrong. It seems to me that by doing my chores, being prompt, calling out my number, and avoiding other prisoners, I have done something wrong. Just as I finished writing how I felt almost normal again, I was forced out of my furnished cell and to the bare cell of prisoner 5401, the man who started the rebellion. Earlier I had been treated special. I got to eat while he watched me. I sat in my uniform while he sat naked and exposed. But now I am the one on the floor naked. Now he is in my cell, on my bed, enjoying my luxuries. I may be delusional. This can't be happening. But at the same time my thoughts and senses are too heightened for this to be a figment of my imagination. I am pinching myself, hoping that grabbing my skin will help me grab onto myself, to bring me back to this earth, and to root my presence to wherever I am now. Instead my heartbeat quickens, as a sharp noise pierces the silence. My hand covers my mouth as if it may be me who is screaming, but it is my neighbor. The scream brings me out of my own mind, but now

all I hear are the muffled sobs and low moans echoing down the halls. Lord help me.

Later this afternoon I was forced to wipe out the bowl full of my own shit and piss with my bare hands. Then I stood for hours for roll call. This was no longer to make sure we were accounted for, this was torture. I began feeling light headed. Sick. I felt as if I might die. I was forced to speak to a priest. But I demanded to see a doctor. But I was sent to the priest. He asked for my name and I responded with my number. Then I broke down into a hysterical fit. Through my sobs and tears I heard the warden try to sooth me. My cap and chain were removed and I was sent to rest in a special room and was told a doctor would see me there. Then the chants rose through the air "819 is a bad prisoner! 819 is a bad prisoner! We are being punished because of you 819!" I couldn't leave. Through heaving sobs I mustered up the strength to run back to the prison. I couldn't be the bad prisoner. I couldn't let the others hate me for getting them punished, for me being weak. The warden grabbed me. He held me firm and convincingly said "Listen, you are not 819. My name is Dr. Zimbardo, I am a psychologist, and this is not a prison. This is just an experiment and those are students, just like you. Let's go." My racing mind and my sobs slowed. I listened. I didn't understand but I listened and believed. Then I followed, and was freed.¹

¹ Philip Zimbardo et al., "The Stanford Prison Experiment," in *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, ed. Philip G. Zimbardo Inc, [Page #], PDF.

Bibliography

Zimbardo, Philip, Craig Haney, W. Curtis Banks, and David Jaffe. "The Stanford Prison Experiment." In *The Stanford Prison Experiment*, edited by Philip G. Zimbardo Inc, 1-26. PDF.