

# Numb

By Michael Bell

I felt it birth in my core and sneak its way up my windpipe. It slithered over my vocal cords and stuck in my throat for just a second. It morphed into an unfamiliar word. Its rancid flavor settled on my tongue and disgusted my taste buds. It pushed past my clenched teeth and forced its way through my tightly pursed lips before finding its place in my welcoming ears— “Numb”.

I must’ve repeated that word, or some variation of it, a hundred times over the past 7 days—hoping to grasp its meaning deep on my viscera.

Numb—numbing—numbness. These words had a hold on my being and refused to release me. They were demanding to be wielded at this particular moment in time.

I. Am. Numb. There I said and now I don’t understand why. The dictionary tells me the word numb is an adjective meaning—having no sensation, or lacking the power to feel, think, or react. None of that accurately describes my state—yet, I am still compelled to utter—numb. I can think—incoherently. I can react—lethargically, and I can feel every sentence, word,

and letter of acting IDOC Director Latoya Hughes' March 15<sup>th</sup> 2024 memo to all individuals in custody.

The memo was written to inform us a, “significant development that will impact Stateville and Logan Correctinal Centers.” She wasn't referring to the humans incarcerated behind its wall, but her focus was on the actual steel, brick and mortar buildings. The memo continues to read, “the previous year IDOC contracted an outside firm to assess and report on the physical condition of each facility to identify our (their) needs...” She never mentions the physical, mental or psychological conditions and/or needs of the human beings being held there.

This memo was less about the demolition of an inhumane, dilapidated—102-year-old prison plantation. \_\_ it is about a state agency forecasting the criminal futures of a whole generation of young people, too young to have been able to commit criminal acts.

The rest of that sentence in the memo reads, “...While considering population projections, staffing levels and the infrastructure of the facilities.” I read this to mean: in the future the state will need space for today's black and brown preteens, we will need jobs for Illinois small towns and illogical building projects to generate kickbacks. This is Illinois right?

My fellow incarcerated brothers and sisters understand clearly this isn't about us. This is about the children who are left behind and the ones who aren't. This is about how to house one group in the future and how the other group will be employed.

My numbness comes from the realization that my two pre-teen nephews are being targeted for capture and state slavery, just as their uncle and father was. My numbness comes from the fear of one day meeting them for the first time—here. It comes from not knowing how to \_\_\_ them to walk the systems tightrope—backwards, hands tied, and no safety net. It comes from turning 19 in prison and then turning 52 in the same housing unit 33 years later. It comes from missing 32 Thanksgivings, 33 Christmases, and 12,135 days of freedom for crimes committed as a child.

It comes from asking a formerly incarcerated representative of a re-entry organization how is his group activating around the rebuilding issue and in affect being told he's willing to gamble with our lives when he responded, "this is new, we've seen this happen before and we're betting on it not happening." Is it just me or is there a contradiction there?

It comes from members of my own incarcerated community believing it's better for us to be in a "better" prison—than none at all.

It comes from close to 1 billion dollars being spent on 2 state of the art prisons when the communities we come from have never seen a single 100 million dollar high school or community space.

It comes from the fact that the only way some young folks will ever see a state of the art anything specifically for them will be a prison.

I have more years behind me than I do in front of me. I may be lost to the historical genocide that is mass incarceration, so I do not plead for myself. I plead for the next generation who will witness more money and resources invested in a prison than will ever be invested in them. I plead for the mothers who fear their sons and daughters will be lost to prison as their fathers, husbands, and brothers were.

I plead for my 2 nephews lives and futures—I offer what's left of mine in their place. Please do not allow them to grow up in a world where they see more places being built to enslave them than to educate them.

I have never met or touched my nephews because their parents don't ever want them to step foot inside of a prison—free or otherwise. I respect their decision—but if the state has plans for our first meeting to be to be as they are

spending their first days of incarceration inside a shiny, brand new Stateville Correctional Center—I pray that I never do.

Please invest in them now, so this place isn't a state option for them later.

So yes, I am numb.