

An Unfinished Revolution: Dialogues on Freedom and Democracy

Dogma

by Justin Surdyka

It's cold, and your depth perception is disoriented by the lack of lighting. Dead center you can't see the beginning or the end; it's as if there is no end. It's more of a tunnel than a hallway, fractured by metal detectors and entrances to units stockpiling humans by the hundreds—condensed containers of containment.

You are meant to feel trapped, you are meant to feel underground, as if you have been buried alive. Claustrophobia is forced upon you, a feeling of “escape or die” within the inescapable.

The walls colorless, coated in dust and black mold from previous decades, from a time of hired hands who couldn't have possibly understood what they were building, what they were concealing.

There's a long slope in the floor as the last few units are approached. You progressively sink lower and lower and lower, you know you are at the bottom, the lowest point possible. Your mind is convinced: this is it. Cameras and uniforms everywhere, everywhere, every one of us desensitized. The German shepherd's bark—a musical of horror. Who does it harm most? What effect does this journey of embodied aggressions have on an individual—the destabilizing trauma it does not only to the one in immediate threat but those who witness and those who hold this weapon?

A prison hallway is fueled by traumatic aggressions. Such is the prison in its entirety, the prison hallway is its own oppressive world. An oppressive world that someone had to design. Someone had to sketch out a blueprint that desired a complete depression of those who would come to know it. Every detail had to be the perfect combination of inferior messaging and spirit murdering. The hallway is no exception. Someone had to construct the hallway knowing it was the central point of all movement. Knowing that it is the lifeline of the prison's message of inferiority to the prisoners' subconscious. Armed with this knowledge, and this mission, the hallway and all its parts represent someone's manipulation of architecture to subject an entire population to trauma. The absence of sunlight, the narrow width, the chalk-white lines that serve as boundaries, and especially, the German shepherd. The German shepherd: a construction of someone's desire to overpower not unlike the hallway itself—someone designed the German shepherd to serve as a superior message of control and harm. That control and harm is an institution of violence, it manufactures fear that is also violent. This execution of violence is magnified once instituted in physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual designs.

The prison, the hallway, the German shepherd are all one in the same.

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Within a prison the German shepherd is more dogma than dog: It is a barking, drooling, lunging representation of what prison truly thinks of you. Its positioning in the hallway is strategic, you have no choice but to encounter it whenever it is necessary for you to move about the prison. What does it say that this hallway, having all of the features that inform you that there is no possible way out, has an additional weapon trained and ready to keep you in?

A viciousness fixated on you, staring you down, barking, snapping its jaws, damn near strangling itself unconscious as it desperately attempts to rip you to shreds. It seems almost pleasurable, its dangling tongue etching its mouth into a smile, it's a game of psychological warfare designed to make you question yourself, your humanity, your risk to the free world. Are you really this dangerous, that the impenetrable caskets of barbed wire, bricks, metals, fences, and armed patrols aren't enough to ensure that you remain in this place of total confinement— that a German shepherd is to be bred into a terrorist in order to keep you in isolation and society safe?

Are you really this much of a threat to society?

There's the initial and most immediate fear of being bitten when you're within feet of crazed teeth excited to sink into you, that might be the first thing that crosses your mind along with the odds of survival when it's actually time for you to survive: Run? Where? Fight? How? There's a deep internalization that takes place simultaneously, this feeling of inferiority—those in positions of power are in control of your beating heart. A dog, an animal, is your superior; it is in control of your beating heart. The canine's position above human in this scenario is demoralizing. What part of the human soul does it speak to when the German shepherd is one of the prison's main enforcers of fear?

This fear that is necessary; a useful tool to deter you from ever questioning or challenging your conditions and treatment from your custodians. You are their property after all.

These life-threatening encounters take place in times when you are most vulnerable—on your way to class, on your way to receive medical treatment, on your way to see loved ones. How does this encounter, this accumulation of terror, stay within you as you reach your destination? How does it sit with you during your midterm exams, or intensify the illness, such as a migraine or nausea as you display your symptoms to the medical staff? How does it impact your ability to be affectionate with someone else who travels a substantial distance to visit you, who has endured the identity checks and metal detectors to see you?

How do you psychologically and emotionally recover enough from the gravest level of fear to regain your composure and be present in your location—how do you bring yourself to physical normalcy after an experience like that? Is it even possible to process, let alone recover?

This idea that becomes indoctrinated into your self-evaluating mind over time is that you deserve this trauma, it is yours because you are clearly unworthy of care that has not protected you against such terror. At a certain point the questioning starts to leave you, and somehow, you get used to the barking, the snapping, the relentlessness—the threat: the

being sought. Somehow, the threat becomes a normal part of your daily routine, you learn to coexist with it, all of it. Meanwhile the relentlessness is transferred to target after target.

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The German shepherd is trained to seek you. You know this as you endlessly witness its reaction to seeing you, but you especially know this through the trauma of anxious anticipation, seeing its aggressions unfolding upon those traveling the hallway ahead of you.

The German shepherd takes no breaks in its terror, its fixation transfers seamlessly from one passerby to the next, to the next, until you become the subject of all its hate-training.

Its presence is a reflection of how you are viewed by the outside world; its presence is a reflection of how you are trained to see others just like you. What does it tell your subconscious as you witness this weapon seeking to destroy a representation of you? Your peer? How do you imagine for yourself a less violent experience from such an innocent act—walking? If your movement alone is so dangerous, if looking ahead to those enduring your impending future is so threatening, what is the point of carrying on? Does a sane person walk into danger knowingly as you are expected to walk into the hallway?

Where do you turn when the option to turn back is violently absent? Turning back is immobility, a cousin of death. Moving forward, toward terror, is insane—necessary—scary—dehumanizing, all wrapped into a civil war of the soul. A psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical dead end, with horrible lighting, a deafening bark, razor-wire teeth, and the presence of endlessness.

What does all this witnessing become when you are not only the witness to this terror others endure, but the witness to your own endurance? What effect does it have on your ability to process the moment if the moment itself is captured by such trauma?

What trauma is inherited by those who are indifferent to your terror and those who hold your life literally in the palm of their hands?

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Cameras. Surveillance escorts stalking your every step.

Their presence, vulture-like, a pressure so intense it's as if they're weighing you down, anchoring you into the hallway's immobility. The cameras capture everything: your every step, the German shepherd in the distance, your anxious approach, the way you tense up, your accumulation of fear, the way you act as if you're unaffected, your traumatic encounter, your picked-up pace, your close call, your escape, your whole-body shake.

The camera itself is just the go-between; there's an actual person watching on a screen everything the camera's eye picks up and records. Footage, burnt into the memory of the viewer. How do they process this documentation, this reel of fear, over and over, a daily ritual of trauma witnessing?

Does this person not feel anything toward what they see, can they see the trauma unfolding, or place themselves in the targets' shoes? What does it take to not feel, to see another human and not relate to their trauma, how long does that process take—the dismissing of commonality? The denial of humanity?

Reprogramming takes time, it's not immediate, it's not human nature to look at a person and not see a person. This is not something that happens overnight. It's a training.

But what's actually taking place when you reach the point of dehumanizing those around you, those whom you watch footage of, or those you terrorize, is that you distance yourself from your own humanity. You begin to dehumanize yourself. The one holding the weapon dehumanizes their own self the most.

Every day someone is charged with the responsibility of hanging onto the leash of the German shepherd. The responsibility of hanging onto the principles of the fear, the principles of the trauma, the principles of the power to operate and execute the principles of the prison hallway. The principles of this dehumanization project in the prison hallway falls directly on the shoulders of the one with the weapon in hand. They succumb to the power through their willingness to dehumanize. They begin to recreate their own rituals that reiterate the hallway's intent. Their willingness to dehumanize and uphold the hallway's intent is evident in the way they speak to the German shepherd, just quiet enough to be discreet yet just loud enough for you to hear. You are "things," and "its," to the weapon conveyed by its handler. You are not referred to as a human so therefore you are not human. The loosening of the grip on the leash is another display of the simultaneous dehumanizations taking place. Has it never crossed their mind to sic this weapon on you—allowing it to maim and murder? Are you to believe this isn't a topic of conversation among a regime of handlers who hold your life in their hands? Have they not cracked jokes about it? Have they not imagined themselves allowing the leash to "slip" from their grip? Are you to believe this has never occurred? Your fear to them pleasurable, their tongues etching their mouths into a smile.

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Once you are introduced to the violence of the prison through the surrogacy of the hallway, there is no detaching yourself from it. It has a constant hold on life inside. It reproduces itself over and over in a variety of ways in daily life. Everything becomes violent. Interactions, thoughts, dreams, escapism: violent, violent, violent, and violent. Funneled in and out of the hallway, you inherit the German shepherd as a structural mascot for violence: a violence icon representing the universal language of prison.

This violence is the perceived key to your subordination, it traps you in a space physically, the hopelessness trapping you in a place mentally, family detachment trapping you in a place emotionally. Whether it is believed or not, the violence is a justification. It is sold to the world-wide public as the only possible way to keep society safe. But is it—is the safety of society insured by imprisoning alleged violators of public safety inside institutions of violence? Are there no other methods to public safety? Using violence as a way to ensure

public safety cannot protect a society from violence or any other transgressions against it. The more violence instituted by a society to achieve public safety, the less safe that society becomes. Violence is a perpetuation, it does not exist solely within the individuals who endure it, violence becomes just as pervasive in the society that institutes it. Public safety can never be achieved as long as violence is the method to achieve public safety. Violence can only produce more violence.

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The lights on the ceiling reflect off the floor. It has been stripped and waxed recently. In the immobility of third shift there was an intense labor taking place that attracted no witnesses. As you walk across the floor you notice how nice it looks, deceptively beautiful compared to the exposed concrete that is your cell floor. You see your peoples you ain't seen in a minute. Y'all embrace as if it's been years. You comment on each other's style, ask about each other's family, and smile as if everything isn't broken. A voice orders that you keep it moving—you move. You're pushed deeper into the density of it all. Solid metal chow carts the size of dressers on wheels fly by you, each one holding hundreds of trays of food stacked on top of each other. They glide past you with deafening authority, they sound like trains in the distance, all that metal clinking. There's so many it's as if they're on a conveyor, you don't think of the trays as a representation of exactly how many people are being held here. Each metal detector you slip through, your body compulsively maneuvers in unnatural ways to not set off its ultrasensitive sensors, yet you never break stride.

German shepherds kiss your hands with their spit as their bark to you becomes as silent as a dog whistle: An officer nods and you reciprocate. A prisoner new to the facility nearly stumbles into you avoiding the leashed terrorist. The officer laughs; you laugh as well. You lend your peer some words of encouragement: "Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

—From the mausoleum (3/24)