

**Thursday, March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2005**  
**Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**OH, THAT SOUNDS TERRIBLE,  
BUT WE CAN'T BE LATE FOR SUPPER.**

He was in Angola State Prison for 24 years. And he was innocent. Michael Williams will be released from prison in a few days. He has spent all of his adult life there. And when he gets out, he won't even get as much as an apology.

In 1981, when he was 16 years old, he was convicted of aggravated rape. There was no physical evidence of any kind. But a jury in Jackson Parish found him guilty. After all of these years, DNA testing proved his innocence and when he gets released, he will be given no money, no housing, no training, and no therapy. He will just be turned loose at the prison gates. Not even a ride back home.

And he's not the only one. Dennis Brown spent the last 19 years in prison, also convicted of rape. He's only 37 years old. DNA evidence cleared him and he was released a few months ago. No condolences. Nothing. The prosecutor in the case showed no remorse. "Nobody likes wrong conclusions, but to characterize it as a mistake is a little difficult." Somebody needs to tell this guy something. He made a big, big mistake.

More than a dozen states have passed laws providing compensation for convicts who were later exonerated. But not in Louisiana. You're just expected to go about your business, assimilating back into society. You certainly have to be realistic about the system. Things slip through the cracks, and innocent people can get convicted. But shouldn't there be some recompense in both these cases? Two individuals spent the better part of their productive years behind bars for a crime they didn't commit. Shouldn't they be offered job training, some counseling, and some compensation for what the system did to them?

Fortunately, in Louisiana, there is an organization called The Innocence Project, based in New Orleans, and headed up by attorney Robert Hoelscher. He reports The Innocence Project is working with 16 inmates they feel were falsely accused in Louisiana, and investigating 30 more.

So why isn't there more outrage expressed when innocent people are convicted? Once a person enters prison, they become a part of a huge disposable population that loses its identity. Out of sight, out of mind. If you're not touched through a personal experience with a family member or a good friend, you just assume that those behind bars are "the bad guys" who are supposed to be there. Most people just don't want to get involved in something so controversial.

Did you see the award-winning movie, “Hotel Rwanda?” It’s about the 1994 genocide where some one million locals were, primarily with Machetes. The central figure in the movie is a hotel manager, who does his best to save those few he can cram into the hotel.

In a chilling point of the movie, the hotel manager’s wife says, “The U.N. will come. America, the free world will be outraged, and they will come.” Her husband plaintively responds, “No, they will respond that a tragedy is taking place, but then they must get on with their supper.”

There’s no doubt there are innocent people still behind bars in Louisiana. They certainly deserve some compensation for wrong doing to them. Presumably, the best people in politics get into the business to create answers for hard problems. Some states have found ways to mitigate the damage to lives that have been affected in such a tragic way. We need to do more than express concern, then “get on” with our supper.

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For the past several months, I’ve had the chance to visit most of the smaller communities in Louisiana. Unfortunately, many of the main streets in each community are empty surrounded by vacant buildings. Almost like ghost towns where business has been sucked away from the many small retailers that used to locate there, as WAL-Mart has come in and located on the town’s outskirts.

It’s a dilemma for the public officials of these small communities. If the town declines to welcome WAL-Mart in, the next town over will offer a few incentives, pulling tax dollars out of local coffers. It seems like mom and pop stores are going by the wayside and our country is being covered by a WAL-to-WAL-Mart carpet.

In Homer, downtown shop keeper bemoaned, “It seems like we have forgotten what it was like to walk instead of drive, to encounter our neighbors on foot instead of in traffic. We seem to have forgotten the vibrancy of civic life, the discussion of issues that takes place on city streets. It’s just not the same.” Did I say in Homer (northwest Louisiana)?

In Minden, a local banker related, “These superstores put their money in big banks and take it far out of town. The money that is spent in the change store leaves town in the next electronic transfer. If the money is spent in a local store, it circulates in the community seven more times before leaving.”

Another Mindenite chimed in, “These superstores use local workers and consumers almost like a colony, taking the local wealth and exporting it back to the home base – something like taking it back to the mother country centuries ago. Remember the American Revolution?”

To be fair, it's not as if WAL-Mart's founder, Sam Walton and his successors created the world's largest retailer by putting a gun to our heads and forcing us to shop there. Most people want the lowest price. But there is a "social price" that has to be paid.

Some of our local communities are doing their best to meet this problem head on. There are state and federal grants available for revitalizing historic districts. Downtown community fairs and other events are regularly scheduled. They make the point that the shopping experience should not be robbed of its community flavor. As a store owner in Abbeville told me, "Shopping malls are all the same. You can be anywhere in the country and you're there except where you really are, your town.

Those communities that keep their "main street" flavor are making a social choice as well as a personal one. Is it worth paying a little more to have the synergy of a better community life?

There are certainly arguments to be made both ways. And I must admit that I do occasionally go to WAL-Mart. But every time I walk in the door, I sense there is a huge monitor staring down at me flashing subliminal messages like:

STAY IN YOUR CARS.  
DO NOT TALK TO STRANGERS.  
DO NOT QUESTION THE WAY WE'VE ORGANIZED YOUR SHOPPING FOR  
YOU.  
DON'T EXPECT US TO FIND ANYTHING FOR YOU.  
SHOP 'TIL YOU DROP.  
HAVE A NICE DAY.

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### **MARTHA STEWART UPDATE**

Boy, they really stuck it to Martha didn't they? She is now out of prison. So what kind of punishment and humiliation did she receive? Far from any negative, her stock, both personal and financial, is soaring. The value of her stock in Martha Stewart Enterprises has doubled since she first left for her five months at Alderson Federal Prison. She is doing a television show, working on a book tour, and has never been more popular. As one column reported, "She has been humanized, has many more adoring fans, and has never been more popular. The Feds did her a favor."

My friend, Andy Borowitz, like me, has been a close Martha observer. "After what happened to Martha at Alderson, I'm told there is a 12-month waiting list of CEOs eager to do time there," Andy said. "I understand their phone has been ringing off the hook, and a lot of these CEOs haven't even committed a crime yet. I'm sure the prison

spokesperson is telling these folks, 'Like go out and commit a crime, then we'll talk.' Yeah, Alderson is the 'place to be' for America's top corporate leaders," Andy said.

"You know Jim, what Harvard Business School was in the '80s and the internet sector in the '90s, federal prison is today."

Martha, you will recall, was never charged or convicted with having undertaken any criminal activity involving the selling of her stock. There was no crime. So she is supposedly giving false information about a crime that never existed. (I happen to be able to relate to that.) So they thought they had nailed her. But when all is said and done, Martha is going to have the last laugh. You go, girl!

A side note. I was giving a speech in a mid-sized parish recently, and the local sheriff came up afterwards for a visit. He told me two FBI agents had come to visit with him recently. "Sure fellows, I would be glad to help you. Just let me get my secretary to bring a tape recorder in here, and my lawyer is just across the street a few minutes away. He will be here in no time."

According to the sheriff, they responded, "But Sheriff, we merely want your cooperation on giving us a little information. You're not a part of our investigation."

He told me he smiled and said, "Gentlemen I'll sum it all up in two words. Jim Brown."

Their response? "You know, we hear that all the time."

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## **Memorable Quotes from The Shawshank Redemption ([1994](#))**

**[Red]:** *[narrating]* Prison life consists of routine, and then more routine.

**[Red]:** *[narrating]* I wish I could tell you that Andy fought the good fight, and the Sisters let him be. I wish I could tell you that - but prison is no fairy-tale world. He never said who did it, but we all knew. Things went on like that for awhile - prison life consists of routine, and then more routine. Every so often, Andy would show up with fresh bruises. The Sisters kept at him - sometimes he was able to fight 'em off, sometimes not. And that's how it went for Andy - that was his routine. I do believe those first two years were the worst for him, and I also believe that if things had gone on that way, this place would have got the best of him.

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown