

DISPATCH: *Arbitrary Cruelty, Louisiana Style* **By Anita Roddick**

I was kicked out of prison last week.

I had gone to Angola prison in Louisiana to visit my friend Albert Woodfox — one of the Angola Three. I hadn't been with him for more than an hour before a phalanx of guards rudely announced that our visit had been terminated and escorted me out the door. No explanation, nothing.

I was angry and frustrated, but not entirely surprised.

Although I didn't know beforehand that he would be there, I saw my friend Robert in the visitation area. He was visiting another inmate, but had the chance to say hello to his old friend Albert after two long years. Robert is one of the Angola Three and was imprisoned himself until February 2001, when he proved he was innocent of the crime for which he was being held. After 31 years in Angola, 29 of them in solitary confinement, Robert had walked out of Angola a free man. Last Friday was the first day he had been back since. Robert hates Angola — for good reason — but it turns out that Angola hates him more.

According to the rules of visitation at Angola, any former inmate may apply to visit after he has been out of prison for at least two years, presuming his criminal record has been spotless in the intervening years. Robert met all the criteria, so he applied. He didn't expect to be approved, since he had been a thorn in the sides of the prison administration for all of his 31 years inside. He had organized hunger strikes to improve the conditions inside the prison, and openly challenged the corruption and abuses of power he saw. As a former Black Panther like Albert, he was a moral leader inside the prison walls. And that made him a constant threat to the wardens.

But he was approved to visit, so he went. When the guards recognized him, they exploded with anger and threw him, and then the rest of us, out.

The why of it is somewhat complicated. It turns out that when Robert was released, his lawyers helped him get set up for life outside. He needed fundamental things, like identification. So when he went to the Social Security Administration for a card, he discovered that the name he had always used — Robert King Wilkerson — was not, in fact, his legal name. He learned that his real name was Robert Hilary King. And his birthday was different, too — he discovered he was a year younger than he thought.

So when he applied for visitation, he used his legal name, as instructed. He also answered truthfully on the form that he had been incarcerated at Angola, and gave the date of his release, and his social security number. But

someone in the classification department at the prison didn't put two and two together, because Robert got in, and they clearly didn't want him there.

I was sitting at a table talking to Albert, and Robert was on the other side of the table, talking to his friend Roy. It was Roy's first "contact visit" — that is, one in which he didn't have to sit shackled behind a metal screen — in 10 years. Also seated at the table were several supporters of the Angola Three, all of whom had been approved through official channels for a visit. Suddenly, five guards converged on Robert and demanded his identification and paperwork. He complied, and they left the room. The tension around the table shot up. So I told an off-color joke about the Seven Dwarves and the Pope. I hope it defused the situation a little.

About 20 minutes later, they burst back in and escorted Robert out of the visiting room and into a waiting car. They drove him outside the prison gates and left him there. A few minutes later, all of Albert's visitors were ordered out, too. Albert sat coolly as he watched it happen; he refused to give his keepers the satisfaction of seeing him angry. I barely had the chance to say goodbye.

We met outside the front gates. A film crew that had been following me for the previous week or so was waiting outside. They began filming as Robert and I described what had just happened. Then, a HUGE warden strolled up and ordered us out of the parking lot and off the prison property. So we complied, and stood just beyond the yellow boundary line, and continued filming. About 10 minutes later three wardens came out again and ordered us to remove our cars from the parking lot. All of it was clearly harassment, a pointless, childish and pathetic show of power.

It was also completely arbitrary — we had broken no rules, we followed every (often silly and redundant) step in the official process for visiting, and yet we were treated like criminals. But after hearing Albert, Robert and Herman Wallace's stories about the arbitrary harassment that is business as usual at the prison, I realized that this was just a small taste of what really goes on inside Angola. It's this blanket authority, blended with an arrogant, bland indifference. It's soul-numbing. It makes Albert's serenity and strength all the more impressive.

Still, I was infuriated. Robert is not only a free man, he had been exonerated of the crime (murdering a fellow inmate) for which he was in Angola for so long. And yet these men in positions of power felt they could still treat him like an animal in a cage, with utter disrespect and abuse.

As Albert's lawyer, Scott Fleming, and I drove back toward New Orleans, we called the prison. Warden Burl Cain picked up Scott's call and yelled at him, accusing him of conspiring to deceive prison officials. He gave Scott no opportunity to explain about Robert's legal name, about the fact that I was not even visiting the same inmate as Robert had been. He hung up on him,

but not before informing him that Albert's visitation privileges had been suspended indefinitely.

For a man who has been in prison for 35 years, visits are precious. To take them away without explanation is just cruel and vindictive.

I was frustrated, and rang Warden Cain myself. I told his assistant that I had come from England to visit Albert and had had my visit terminated without the courtesy of an explanation. I was informed that I would not be allowed to return the next day for a make-up visit "pending an investigation." An investigation into what? I asked. "I don't have that information," I was told.

Later, we heard that the inmate Robert had been visiting, Roy, had been thrown into the "dungeon" — a featureless, sensory-deprivation-style solitary confinement cell. Scott, who also represents Herman Wallace (the third member of the Angola Three) said he was worried that the warden's anger might trickle down to Herman, who is already in Camp J — an extreme punishment cell block. Herman was sent there nearly a year ago after a "metal shim" was "discovered" in his cell. He says the shim was planted there by guards.

The wholesale, arbitrary, cruel harassment of these men continues. Petty bureaucrats entertain themselves by making these men's lives as miserable as they can manage. But the more time you spend with these men and the people who support them, you realize that if anything, the Angola administration fears them, because they have a moral advantage. They are the ones who have been teaching their fellow inmates about the history of civil-rights and nonviolent resistance. They are the wisdom-keepers, respected by fellow inmates, and therefore powerful leaders among the systematically disempowered.

I asked Scott why they seem to hate Robert so much at Angola. After all, other men have been found innocent and let go. Why is Robert a special case? "He was one of the 'rebellious' prisoners they hate and have always hated. They resent the fact that he beat them by getting out. He beat them. They wanted to torture him until he died. And he walked out of there one day, and they'll probably never forgive him for that." Making it worse, it seems that although Robert followed all of the instructions for visiting to the letter, the prison wardens were deeply resentful when they actually saw him show up to visit. "They probably feel like they did the day he walked out of there," Scott said. "Like he got over on them, and made them look stupid." I can't imagine that's hard to do.

The next day, Robert invited me to his home in New Orleans for a fabulous meal and good conversation. Over Robert's homemade fried chicken, ribs, red beans and rice, and lemonade, I chatted with a room full of fascinating

people: civil-rights lawyers and death-row attorneys, several former Black Panthers, Herman's sister Vickie and Albert's brother Michael, and a young man named J.T. who had just been released from death row after 18 years.

The conversation kept coming back to the arbitrary cruelty of the previous day's events. You could feel, in that room, a quiet knowledge that the warden's overreaction was about his own false power versus the very real moral power of these innocent men.

Nick Trenticosta, one of the attorneys working on Albert and Herman's appeals, said Albert recently pointed out how ironic it is that the administration spends such energy on harassing the Angola Three. Most of the reforms that the three men pushed for over the years — such as better food, more access to exercise, a law library — have come to pass. Now, those reforms that the administration resisted for so long are the very things they brag about today. Of course, they claim credit for all of it.

There is something essentially unnerving about Angola. It is a place dedicated to breaking men's spirits, and yet its officials are so proud of it. They have a prison museum (complete with decommissioned electric chair!) and gift shop, which struck me as vaguely obscene. While I was there this time, there were several tour buses full of school children on tours, as if this were Disneyland. I asked one of the young girls why they wanted to tour Angola. She said that the tours were partially intended to discourage children from pursuing a life of crime. But also, they wanted to learn about this so-called "progressive" prison.

Indeed, Angola is touted as a successful experiment in rehabilitation. This largely has to do with Warden Burl Cain's implementation of a Baptist theology school, where inmates can earn legitimate degrees. Cain himself is an evangelical Christian, and sees as part of his duty "saving souls." One of the most effective ways for prisoners to get ahead — be it winning privileges or avoiding punishment — is to be active in the Christian groups and services inside the prison. Several former inmates have told me that Cain allows Muslim inmates to read the Koran and Jews the Torah, but it is clear that he favors Christians. He has said that he likes to be present at executions so he can help their souls into the next world, and that he feels bad executing non-Christians because he knows they will go to hell.

I also found it eerie that so many of the guards and wardens looked alike. And then I discovered that most of the administration's top jobs are handed down from generation to generation in the same 6 or 7 families. Angola prison has become a family business, a breeding ground for future wardens. The families even live year-round inside the prison walls in a small town far from the main prison, couched in the rolling hills and manicured fields of this former slave plantation. They run the place like a fiefdom, and in a sense, it

is one. They have absolute power over a tiny nation of captives, and they are as arrogant and corrupt as any dictators in a totalitarian regime.

And like any dictator, Warden Cain brooks no challenge to his own skewed ideology. He has said that if Herman and Albert simply denounced their political beliefs (meaning their affiliation with the Black Panthers and what they stood for), they would immediately be removed from solitary confinement and returned to the general population.

Considering that Cain has linked these men's punishment — 31 years in solitary — to their political beliefs, there truly can be no question that they are political prisoners right here in America. It's time we called them that.