

Blacks Feel Jailed by Color

Robert Johnson, 46, a former social worker, is warden of Graterford state prison in Pennsylvania, one of the first blacks named to head a major prison. His prison staff is 80 per cent white; 80 per cent of the inmates are black.



ANTHONY J. RUSSO
... Ellsberg friend

door flew open and ... the captain was there. He had rest authority ... and he said, "Are you Mr. Russo?" I said, "Yes." He said, "We didn't know who you were." ... and that made me mad as hell because what that meant was that this was par for the course ...

Question: What kind of a problem did you have coming in as a black warden in a largely white correctional staff?

Johnson: Everybody seems to think that's a big problem, but really I haven't seen any big problem ... I'm interested in what's happened to prisons because of the influx of blacks, young blacks. In many ways the American prison system has become a system which imprisons black people, at a time when race consciousness is very high in the country, and that's very special. Many black prisoners feel that

they're in prison because they're black ... There's a very convincing argument that there is a special penalty in the corrections system for being black ...

Q. Does this make for internal problems in the corrections system?

A. No question about it ... You're asking the prisons to resolve a problem that the whole country is faced with. Prisons can't do it. Prisons are probably the worst places in the world to re-socialize people ...

Q. Well, why are you in corrections? It's a tough job.

A. Sometimes I ask myself the same question. Social consciousness, really. With so many black people being involved in the criminal justice system, really. This is one of my main reasons for staying ... So many people are there because of a lack of love ...

Q. Are you saying that you see the crux of your job as introducing a humane and loving relationship into the lives of men?

A. No question about it.

Q. ... How do you take people who are in an institution built of ceramic, concrete and steel, and introduce the idea of human love and trust?

A. By practicing it myself, by getting other people in the institution to practice it ...

Q. How do you say that to a man to whom you're also saying, "You get into that cell and I'm going to lock the door on you and I'm going to determine when you get out.?"

A. There are ways to do that even.

Q. How?

A. For one thing, by not saying, "Get in there, you black m---er."