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Walking The Track

Inmates often fill their time with activities that at first glance may seem foolish. I can think of one in particular that occupies many hours of my week. When I first saw people doing it I thought they were weird. Now I too participate in this ritual on a consistent basis. What is this pastime that is so much a part of our lives? It is the simple act of walking the track.

When I first witnessed prisoners walking in circles I thought that they must be stir crazy or bored out of their minds. I could not think of a bigger waste of ones life than to be reduced to moving endlessly around in one direction. Little did I realize that my future was being played out before me. I did not know how central pacing off miles would be to my life.

There were both written and unofficial rules I had to learn about this form of exercise in prison. The first one was to walk in the right direction. Every institution is different but most enforce a policy of one-way movement on the track. This rule is for the safety and security of the inmates. It makes it easier for the guards to keep track of what is taking place on the yard. Then I had to learn not to stop moving on the track. Standing in the path of traffic creates problems for everyone. The final rule that was a must to understand is that the inside of the track is for fast movement. When walking counterclockwise if I heard someone yell "track" from behind me it ment they wanted to pass me. In most cases this meant I needed to move to the right.

The regulations are quite simple but are important for everyones safety. They help to make it possible for all concerned to enjoy the time spent stretching our legs. When I write "everyone", I literally mean all the inmates on the yard. There are very few people in this prison who do not spend some time traveling in circles. Regardless of age and health concerns this activity is almost universal in the institution in which in live.

Time spent on the track is more than just about movement, it is part of the prison culture. It is so much a part of our lives we have standardized comments and jokes about our experience. One such joke is someone will ask, "have you found the exit yet?" Someone else might quip, "hey haven't I been here before?" One of my favorite comments is, "when I get released the first thing I want to do is make a right turn."

In spite of the humor walking is serious business. Often inmates bond during these repetitions motions. Much of a prisoner's social life can incorporate the use of the walkway. We do more than just stroll the yard. As we amble along we discuss bot casual and weighty matters. While hanging out talking we are often asked, or ask soemone else, "want to walk?" The two activities seem to fit together. People sometimes open up more when they are moving.

I have learned to watch a person's actions on the track. For instance, what is their choice of walking partners. Often this detail has helped me to gauge them. There have been inmates that I avoided because of the company they kept. Noticing how someone behaves on the track has helped me to avoid dangerous situations. My experience has taught me if an inmate is rude or aggressive on the track he may not be a safe individual.

Walking the track not only provides a common ground for socializing it can also be important for the emotional health of an inmate. Too much time spent inside can add to the depression that is common in prison. Exercise, fresh air, and sunlight are powerful factors in the fight against the blahs. They also help relieve some of the tension that can accumulate from long periods of incarceration.

I have learned the wisdom of walking the track. Eleven years of being locked up has taught me to appreciate the time spent in striding ever counterclockwise. I know that the value of this activity is often missed by newcomers. As a more seasoned inmate; I try to encourage them to give this form of exercise a try. It is often the first step in adjusting to their new surroundings.

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