

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

May 23, 2011

Feeding time at the zoo - otherwise known as meals in prison - is a unique experience. The food is not that bad. It's not that good either. It can be considered an average American diet. There are a large variety of items and menus vary daily and weekly. I was noticing at breakfast this morning how one of the guys at the 4-man table where I sit always brings a peanut butter jar to breakfast on those days the prison serves peanut butter. We each receive a ping-pong ball sized lump of peanut butter with 2 pieces of toast (plus cereal and sometimes coffee cake) on peanut butter day. He saves his lump and asks for peanut butter from anyone else who isn't going to eat their portion. He deposits them into his jar and takes it back to his cell. When it is full he trades it to another prisoner for other canteen items.

Food is served cafeteria style. We go through the line, everyone getting the exact same thing on their tray of food (except for those guys with medical or religious dietary needs). Then the bargaining begins. Guys wheel and deal from one meal to the next, perhaps trading a piece of cake from one meal for a cookie at a future meal. Some guys sneak portions of their food back to their cells to enjoy later, sometimes mixing in the state food with canteen purchases to create a better "hook up." Hook up is the prison slang for mixing Ramen soups, beans, sausage sticks and peppers together into a meal that is cooked in the microwave in the dayroom. I don't like hook ups and don't make them or eat them.

I am not enthused about eating state food either. One of the things I look forward to upon release is going to a grocery store and buying mountains of fresh fruits and veggies and stuffing myself. My preference would be to avoid all red meat. Many meat-containing entrees served in prison are made with a ground up mixture of beef, turkey and soy protein. I don't mind the soy but I hate the thought of polluting my body with the low-grade turkey and beef they use. I try to avoid it as much as possible without depriving my body of needed nutrients. Moderation is the key.

I am not very big so servings contain more food than I could possibly eat. I give a lot of it away. There's no point in trading because I have no use for more food. I can only eat so much. However, I do sometimes accept cooked veggies or salads from other guys who don't eat the stuff that's good for them.



One of Wisconsin's reactionary Republican legislators recently proposed reducing prison meals from 3 to 2 per day as a means of saving money. It appears to be political grandstanding. They are constitutionally required to serve us a minimum number of calories per day. Whether that occurs in 2 or 3 meals per day is irrelevant. I have read in fitness magazines and books that it is better to eat more, smaller meals every day. It seems that reducing the number of meals would lead to obesity and increase health care costs.

The number of mean-spirited people in government these days is appalling. They search for a way to show how tough on crime they are. Those ideas usually involve making things harder on those already in prison. How that will reduce crime or protect the public is beyond me. Inflicting harsher conditions on the person who was already caught and sent to prison does nothing to deter the person who is not in prison. The free person does not look at prison conditions as a factor until after he or she is caught and it looks likely that a trip to prison will occur. By that time it is too late so making prison conditions harsher does nothing more than inflict needless suffering on human beings.

But getting back to prison food, Wisconsin now has a standardized menu for all prisons where everyone theoretically eats the same meal as served at every other prison. This will save money by consolidating purchases and centralized distribution. That is a good idea. However, there are still variations between prisons. The prisons with more humane food service supervisors serve better meals. The work release centers generally serve better food and I would guess that is because of all the prisoners on work release who pay room and board. Anyway, I would much rather be back at a work release center eating their meals than the meals served at Stanley.