

A few days ago, I was replacing a photo I'd just received back. Consequently, I began to scan through the rest of my collection and I eventually came across a picture of my mom's entire side of the family taken seven years ago at my grandparent's 50th wedding anniversary. It would be the last time that all 21 of us were together. Soon we were split up by death, divorce, incarceration, and the restlessness of post-graduation life.

I don't put any photos around my room. For a short time during the middle of my bit, I kept up two or three, but the bland surroundings of the cell quickly began to swallow them and before long they rarely caught my eye or affected me like they originally had. However the infrequency, over the last couple of years, of taking trips down memory lane has allowed me to reacquaint myself with their power. So, that group shot really hit me the other day.

Growing up, I didn't care much for virtually any of the adults in my family, although I always felt comfortable around and affection for my cousins. As a result, it has been increasingly difficult to hear about (second hand, usually) and experience (second hand, at best) the ups and downs of their journeys through young adulthood.

I looked at that photo for some time, smiling and shaking my head just as you'd expect from one blind-sided by happy images and sad thoughts. I considered alternate realities where I hadn't sacrificed nearly two decades of my life for fake pride. I imagined what, if any, role I might have played in my cousins' current lives. I contemplated the possibility that I may have missed the opportunity to have the kind of loving, confiding relationship that, as an only child, I've never had with any family member around my age—or anyone, in the family, period, before I got locked up. I even stressed about future worst case scenarios that would effectively destroy any chance of us ever becoming close.

Then I thought about the first and second generations, which I had long disregarded. I sat there and suffered the now familiar shame and humility of having once held this attitude, especially when compared to the seemingly unconditional support and love my relatives have given me from the moment of my arrest. I dwelt on the way my relatives have clearly displayed the importance and power of family. The ultimate result of all this mental activity was a solidification and even enhancement of both my gratitude towards them and the obligation I feel to honor their warmth and assistance, as well as the virtue of family when I get out. It did to my determination to stay out once I'm released what an additional layer of armor does to a tank.

We tend to view our release and success thereafter as personal issues: I need to stay out, I need to give myself a chance, I need to do this for me. But we would strengthen our motivation and ability to accomplish these goals if we keep in mind those who have suffered with us all throughout our sentences and the hurt we'd cause them were we to ever return to prison. We may think that society owes us a second chance or the same opportunities as everyone else, but we surely owe our loved ones a life without the drama of the criminal justice system and the pain of our reincarceration.