

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

December 8, 2014

Christmas In Prison

I suppose people out in the real world think that it would be horrendous to be stuck in prison for the holidays. I suppose it would be if you were used to living in free society where you can come and go as you please, see your family and friends whenever you want, eat good food, have pleasurable experiences and enjoy life to the best of your ability.

But for those of us who have spent decades in prison, the suffering has pretty much ended. We have endured so much privation for so long we have numbed ourselves to our losses. It no longer hurts that I can't see my daughter or grandchildren. It is just an ache that never goes away - like arthritis or chronic back pain. Sure, it's still there gnawing at me every day. But it no longer pierces my heart with the excruciating, immediacy it once had.

People in prison adapt to the privation and after a while it becomes the new normal. It is normal to never have enough money to buy needed items. It is normal to not be allowed to wear good clothes, eat good food, go where we please or do what we want. Long timers in prison essentially have to train themselves to become institutionalized in order to survive the decades in prison. No doubt many of the long timers would object and deny that they are institutionalized because of the negative connotation that term has. But it is the only way anyone can survive decades in prison without severe psychological damage. A well-behaved (model) prisoner never realizes he or she is institutionalized until transfer to minimum or release. I have seen it many times (and experienced it myself) when I was at a work release center. Guys lose the ability to read social cues in normal society. They cannot judge situations because they've been away from normal life for so long they don't know how to respond.

One night I was taking the second shift work crew back to the work release center after their shift at the meat processing factory. There was one guy who recently transferred there after 20 years in medium and maximum security. I was traveling on a road parallel to train tracks upon which a train was approaching from behind. As the bright light of the locomotive lit up the van, the man began yelling "stop", believing that I was going to drive onto the tracks so I could kill us all. His fear and panic were real. Everyone else got a good laugh at his expense but I felt compassion for him, having gone through the reacclimatization process myself. Now, after 4 years back in one of the harshest prisons I've ever been in, I'll have to unlearn all the survival mechanisms I adopted while at Stanley when I return to a more normal environment.

Never in the history of our country have so many people been locked up for so long in ever-worsening conditions. There once was a time when the prison reform movement focused on improving prison conditions to make them more humane to limit the damage caused by imprisonment. That movement is dead. The current mindset is to restrict everything as much as possible and to reward through promotion those DOC officials creative enough to find ways to further restrict prisoners while appearing to address a legitimate security need.

In the 1970s, there was a move to abolish prisons altogether. Federal Judge James Doyle (father of ex-governor Jim Doyle) was a prison abolitionist and did more to bring Wisconsin prisons into the 20th century than anyone else. In the 21st century, prisons have regressed to new heights of high-tech deprivation and oppression. Prisons are used to house mentally ill people, drunk drivers and drug addicts. Actual criminals are few and far between.

What has all this got to do with Christmas? While you are having your Christmas dinner or opening your presents, imagine this: you have to live in your bathroom with a mentally ill homeless person (who refused to take his or her medication), that you must wear a thin, green prison uniform, that you are always cold because the heat is kept so low, that each meal you eat is a disappointment in quality and quantity and that you are only allowed outside of your bathroom for 10 hours per day. That will give you a little taste of what it is like in prison. And that experience may be your best Christmas present of all.

M E R R Y C H R I S T M A S