

## UNDERSTANDING PRISON

Thursday

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If you've never been to prison for any length of time, then it's difficult, if not impossible, to truly understand what a loved one who's incarcerated is going through. This, however, doesn't mean that you shouldn't make the attempt. Doing so, by asking your loved ones to open up, will go a long ways towards letting them know they're loved and appreciated, and even a little bit of understanding gained from discussing prison life with them can make a tremendous impact when it comes to maintaining a meaningful relationship with them. With that said, following is a letter I wrote for myself immediately following a suicide attempt. After years of trying, unsuccessfully, to learn the whereabouts of my daughter, I'd come to the realization that my incarceration would make any attempts on my part to be a part of her life completely meaningless, especially when the people who were in her life possessed so much power over what I could, and couldn't, do when it came to building relationships. This, combined with being incarcerated so far from home, not being able to receive visits, make phone calls (anyone who's taken collect calls from an inmate knows how expensive they can get, especially back then, before the rates were capped), even my letters were all but nonexistent. Suicide seemed like my only option, not because I didn't want to live, but because I felt as if I had nothing to live for, so, in a fit of despair, and urged on by officers taking bets on whether or not I'd actually do it, I made the decision to end my life by cutting my wrists. Had it not been for the intervention of another inmate screaming his head off, I wouldn't be here today to share this story with you.

With that said, as you read it, please don't focus on the intelligence of my decision to end my life, but instead, focus on the pain and suffering I felt. I say this because, if you've got a loved one in prison, what I felt is nothing unique. In here, all of us, without exception, feel the hopelessness and despair that's so inherent in doing time, most of us just choose not to discuss it, opting instead to put on a "brave face" for the whole world to see. After awhile, it becomes second nature, until we finally manage not only in fooling our loved ones, but also ourselves.

This, however, doesn't mean this is the way it has to be. If you want to make a difference in the life of a loved one, or even a perfect stranger, then here are a few simple ways you can go about doing it.

First, don't judge. Whether guilty or innocent, we've all had more then our fair share of being judged. First the prosecutor had his way with us in court, followed by the judge, and if we went to trial, a jury of our so-called "peers," people who didn't know anything about us prior to trial, had never walked a mile in our shoes and who moved on with their lives as if nothing happened immediately following trial. After trial, we were judged by our victims, real and imagined, before being sent off to prison where everyone seems to line up to judge us. Upon arrival, the guards all read our files and discuss the matter amongst themselves, and if we say or do anything to offend their delicate natures, our most personal and humiliating information is instantly broadcast by them for the whole world to see. As if this wasn't bad enough, our fellow inmates all line up to take turns judging us, trying to make themselves feel better by putting us down. Believe it or not, while there are certainly plenty of people who genuinely deserve to be in prison, the vast majority of us are just regular people who made poor decisions, and many of those are either truly innocent, or only did a fraction of what they were accused of, so the last thing any of us needs is for someone to judge us. Believe me, we get enough of this from others, and what they fail to provide, we more then make up for it on our own, as we're our harshest critics, playing

and replaying every tragic mistake ever made as we lay down each night.

Being involved with someone in prison, regardless of the fashion (pen pal, friendship, romance, etc.), involves a commitment on your part. If you think that life in the free world is difficult, working to pay the bills, taking the kids back and forth to school, cleaning the house, taking care of the yard work, etc., then imagine how difficult life in here can be. Every move in here is scrutinized by hundreds of people, most of whom are looking for a weakness to exploit. That weakness can often take the form of losing contact with a loved one, so if you desire to be a part of a loved one's life while incarcerated, always remember that it takes a commitment.

This isn't to say that we expect letters every day of the week, because we don't. Relationships are about "quality," not "quantity." Write when you can, accept the calls when and if you can, and if possible, drop by from time to time, but when you do, make it all about us, just as we'll try to make it all about you. Don't spend half the phone call arguing with someone who's over visiting, don't put the phone down to take care of some menial chore. Talk to us. Tell us how you're feeling and what, if anything, we can do to help because, even from in here, we want more than anything to be useful to those we care about.

When you do reach out to us, remember to be compassionate. We don't see that very often in here, and for good reason, but that's not to say we miss it and don't want it in our lives. We've just been without it for so long that we've forgotten what it looks like, and worse, how to express it in return, so when you communicate with us, be compassionate. When we fail to respond the way you expected, don't give up. It's going to take patience, on both of our parts, if this relationship's going to work, whatever form it takes, which brings me to my next suggestion: communicate.

Regardless of how you classify your relationship, or how it takes place (through the mail, over the Internet, in person, with someone in prison, etc.), the single most important thing you can ever do is communicate openly and honestly. If there's a problem, then SPEAK UP! Don't just sit there, suffering in silence. If you don't tell us there's a problem, leaving it to us to figure out, then there's a very real chance that we never will, and when things get so bad that you finally speak up, it will be too late, the relationship will be irreparably damaged. So when there's a problem, communicate, but when it comes to problems in your relationships, do so in your letters. Having it there, in writing, gives us a chance to really ponder what it is that you're saying. More importantly, when it's said through a letter, we both have a chance to stop and think about what it is that we're really trying to say, to ponder if this is the way we really want to say it, and perhaps most importantly, when it's said in a letter, no one feels the need to react in a way intended to "save face." Instead, we can respond genuinely, from a place of understanding deep within.

Believe it or not, communicating with an inmate, whether you know him (or her) or not can be one of the most rewarding relationships of your life. Snail mail has a tendency to force both parties to focus on getting to truly know and understand each other. I don't know anyone who's written faithfully for more than a couple of years who didn't end up becoming closer than they'd ever been. Those who already knew each other find their bonds strengthening, those who are just meeting through the mail find genuine friendships forming. I've even seen people fall in love and get married, all because of the magic qualities possessed by snail mail, and if you doubt what I'm saying, then find an inmate who genuinely wants to write and give it a shot. In the meantime, check out the letter below. It might help provide you with a better understanding of just how miserable things in here really are, although, to be perfectly honest, I didn't even describe a fraction of a percent of what we're forced to endure in here, and on a daily basis.

As I lay here on my bunk, I can hear the footsteps of the man next door. The rubber soles of his shower slides whisper to the concrete floor, introducing themselves, over and over to the same stretch of real estate as he paces mindlessly back and forth. He reminds me of a scratched record, spinning round and round the turntable. There's no way to determine how long it's been going, or how long it will last, only the certainty that it will continue until someone steps in and gives it a gentle nudge in the right direction. Each pass slowly drives me closer and closer to the edge of insanity, denying you any form of concentration as it's magnified and echoed off his unpainted concrete walls. He has the shuffle of a man who's walked endless miles under the scorching desert sun in a fruitless search for water or civilization.

There's not much I can do to stop the madness slowly approaching. I'm in prison, and my options, like my movements, are rigidly controlled, dictated to me by others who seem to take a savage delight in the unrestricted power they've been granted over me. My only choices are to obey, without question, or to suffer the consequences swiftly distributed by the green-clad American prison Gestapo. I've tried doing things their way, over and over, but their methods have been proven, time and time again, not to work, yet still they stubbornly insist on refusing to change. Seeing yet another day of hopelessness and despair ahead of me, my heart grows heavier, something I'd previously believed to be impossible.

I move around on my bunk, trying to get comfortable, but comfort escapes me. The concrete under my thin mattress laughs at my feeble attempts. Like the guards, it's cold, hard and unfeeling, and like a broken and antiquated prison system, it too fails to conform as society continues to evolve, instead expecting the rest of the world to adapt to its permanently frozen and broken ways.

The cold winter air is my only visitor, blowing into my cell and seeping deep into my bones, seeming to casually stop and socialize with all of my body's cells on the way, deterred not in the least by my prison issue wool blanket, worn down and full of questionable odors, like much of the system. Like so many who work here, it's time for replacement came and went long ago, its presence overlooked by the greed and corruption of a system designed to fail. The only real purpose these serve is to continue to erode those they were intended to cover and protect.

Depressed, I struggle to shut out the sounds of my pacing neighbor while trying to ignore the effects of a bed of stone. It's difficult. I have no real door, only an impersonal, heavy duty steel screen door, rank with the odors of urine, vomit and feces of an untold number of men before me. It's designed to keep the most violent of men inside, while allowing the insanity of prison life to continuously seep in and overwhelm the cell's occupant. Despite this, and so much more, I finally manage to succeed, only to magnify the assaults brought to my other senses.

Having existed for decades without so much as being exposed to a genuine cleaning article, the odors are powerful, and unfiltered. In my mind's eye, I can see the men who stood over this toilet before me, too many men to even try counting. Despite our differences in color, shape and size, we all share the need to void ourselves in this rank and crusty stainless steel bowl, covered with layer upon layer of filth, bacteria, feces and Lord only knows what else.

Another odor makes its presence known, and I look up, vaguely familiar with the scent, yet unable to place it. As I look around my cell, struggling to identify this new visitor, I glance out of the tiny slit in my wall and see a plane flying low to the ground just outside of the prison. All of a sudden, memories come flooding back to me, images of a forgotten past. I realize the plane is the cause for this new assault on my nostrils. It's the odor of millions of fertilizer made from the feces of the millions of turkeys raised at the nearby farms. The putrid gas of these foul fowl waft through the air as its released by the nozzles on the plane's wings, the scent drifting for miles in this area, deserted of all except for the men warehoused in this place, and the lunatics who watch over them. My stone coffin becomes filled with this new overwhelming odor, and my chest grows tighter and tighter as I struggle for each new breath, contaminating my lungs with this new poison.

The smells are so rancid that I can actually taste them. I spit and rinse my mouth with lukewarm water from the prison sink in an attempt to purge my tastebuds, but in the end, I fail. The contents from my meager last meal rise up to greet the back of my throat in a rush of acid and spray before meeting the filth on the sides of the toilet bowl. I try to rinse my mouth again, so disgusted that I don't even make an attempt to follow my usual ritual of allowing the water to sit for a few minutes, the only way to rid the water of the millions of tiny bubbles that float around when it first exists the tap. I take a sip, feeling like I'm drinking a carbonated glass of rancid water drained from the bottom of a swimming pool.

I endure all of these impediments, and more, in near virtual solitude. The only contacts permitted with the outside world are my mail and a TV. I pray daily for the blessings of either, eagerly anticipating the day's evening round of slop, as this is when the mail, if any, is passed out. I silently beg and plead with God for a letter, even a bill, something to let me know that at least someone thought of me. A letter from a friend or family member is enough to set me on Cloud 9 for days. All of a sudden, the filth and squalor of my current living conditions take a back seat to the joy of knowing that someone actually cared enough to put their thoughts into words and actions by writing to me. It's difficult to explain the pure joy the price of a stamp can bring, a joy that's exponentially magnified when in the bowels of the prison's dungeon. I look around my cell, and I can actually see the gloom beginning to fade, dissipating like the fog when hit by the harsh rays of the summer's morning sun as it peeks over the horizon. When that guard stops by my cell with an envelope in his hand, even my neighbor's pacing seems almost musical to my ears, but when he passes by my cell, as he so often does, day after day, the harsh reality of my situation once again sets in.

As I write this, the evening meal draws closer and closer and my hopes begin to rise, not at the evenings dinner prospects, for they've always been, and always will be, lukewarm and barely edible swill. Instead, I begin to anticipate this evening's mail call, at the glorious possibility that I could receive a letter on this last, and toughest, mail day of the week. If nothing comes today, then I'll have to sit here and wait until at least Monday to hear from anyone in the outside world, Tuesday if Monday's a holiday. If nothing comes today, it means that my weekend will be even more miserable than usual. I just hope it's not a weekend. I hate weekends in prison.

Another day has come and gone without a letter. have I been forgotten? Am I thought so little of that people will allow weeks, even months, to pass me by without sending me word to let me know I haven't been forgotten? Does no one care about me any longer? As I sink even further into despair, I wonder just how long it would take for people to notice my absence if I faded away completely.

Ahh, death, my old friend, come to talk to me again. The time between our sessions grows shorter and shorter. I can still remember the last time we spoke, indeed, the scars on my arm are still fresh. It was last year, just before All Hallow's Eve, and while the children in the neighborhood were all getting their store-bought costumes and fake blood together in order to imitate you, I was trying to become one with you. The blade of the razor whispered quietly across my epidermis as it indiscriminately greeted skin and muscle. So sharp, so quiet, so painless. The blood was warm, almost hot, as it slid down my arm, startling me with its speed, but not half as much as it did when it sprayed across my cell and splattered against the wall when I flexed my wrist.

Always one for personal cleanliness, my first instinct was to stand over my sink, so as not to create a mess, but it was too late. Besides, doing so would have been an exercise in futility, given the deplorable conditions left by the cell's previous occupants. Watching the blood spray from my arm to the beat of my heart was soothing, almost hypnotic, and yet, I was filled with a sense of rage at having been pushed to this point. I wanted to spin around in circles, flinging the blood around in a fit of anger. I wanted to finish the cut, going all the way around the wrist, so I could remove my skin like a glove.

Despite my feelings, I was filled with a sense of wonder. For just a moment, as I sliced my way down, I could see all the different layers of skin and muscles, even a tendon, as they separated like the red sea before that first spray gushed forth. As I sat there watching my life's blood leave me, I was filled with a sense of uncontrollable regret and despair at the thought of having left this world without even getting a chance to see my daughter.

I lay back down on the bed, contemplating the thought of her, hoping and praying she'd understand. As I lay there, I could feel an overwhelming sense of peace come over me. It almost seemed that, for each drop of blood leaving my body, one of my troubles also left. I began to feel a loosening of the overwhelming pressures forced upon me, but full peace was deprived and reality came crashing in as you were forced to leave me, my friend. Perhaps next time you can take me away to that place of peace you always speak of, but for now, this tiny sliver will have to do.

It frustrates me to continue in this world of strife, locked up for a crime I didn't commit, as people who know nothing about me bought into the lies expertly weaved into a plausible story by a skilled prosecutor. Perhaps I should have allowed an attorney to represent me, but I naively believed that the truth would set me free. It didn't, and now I lay here in agony, trying to figure out a way out. How long must I endure such agony? How much torture must I bear before I finally slip out of their meddling sight, once and for all? Later, I'll say it's the depression talking, but now, I'm saying that I'm sane. Who's to know for sure? The only thing I can say for sure is that life is indeed not fair, not even remotely, and I'm completely powerless to do anything to change it.

2005(c)

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