

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

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Forty Dollars For a Visit

My current cell mate is a young guy who has never been in prison before and has an entirely different world view than most other prisoners. He also has affluent parents who lavish him with whatever he wants - money for canteen, clothes, books, etc. I think it is good that families take care of their loved one who is in prison - up to a point.

He is getting his first visit next week and is boasting about how he is going to consume \$40 worth of items from the vending machines (each visitor can bring in \$20 in change for the machines). I pointed out to him that he plans on spending more money in a single visit than most prisoners earn in an entire month.

Prison wages vary from 12¢ to 42¢ per hour based on 5 pay ranges (Rate 1: 12¢ (20%), Rate 2: 19¢ (30%), Rate 3: 26¢ (20%), Rate 4: 35¢ (20%), and Rate 5: 42¢ (5%). There are also prisoners who are unassigned but are still paid 5¢ per hour (5%). The listed percentages indicate how many prisoners can earn each pay rate. A 3 rate earns approximately \$40 per month. That means 45% of the prisoners earn as much as (or more) than he is going to spend on his visit. Many prisoners also have deductions for court costs, restitution and/or child support.

I can imagine how those guys who have so little money would react to a \$40 windfall - planning each purchase with care to maximize the impact of that windfall. They would be immensely grateful and good stewards of the money. After having learned the value of \$40, they would never consider consuming \$40 on a visit just because they can. Until someone has been placed in a position of scarcity, they cannot appreciate abundance.

His response was that their lack had nothing to do with him. He didn't seem to get the point I was trying to make. A sign of maturity is the ability to empathize about the plight of others. He doesn't care about others prisoners or his family.

Are his parents so wealthy that they can spend whatever amount will satisfy his desires? Probably. But I wonder, why is a person from a well-to-do family in prison for crimes that are normally only committed by poor people out of necessity? I think if his parents stopped enabling him and gave him some tough love, he would be less likely to return to prison.

Some people have it too easy. Their characters are never forged in the fires of adversity. But maybe I'm being too harsh and he'll become more mature. Let's hope so. And hope he stops being a burden to his family.