

INSPIRATION

Everyone talked quietly among themselves as we waited for her to arrive. Two hundred women were seated in the gym, with a dozen guards stationed around the perimeter of the room. Long gray curtains partitioned off part of the room, and hid behind them the old creaky bleachers and various cabinets, athletic gear, and other detritus usually found in the prison's gymnasium. I knew this because I was in charge of getting everything moved and cleaned in preparation for the ceremony. I felt a tinge of embarrassment because the gym floor looked filthy. No matter how many times we sweep and mop it, the ground-in dirt won't come off.

"I hope she comes soon," someone said, "my butt's getting sore."

Finally, Governor Palin arrived. The room fell silent as she and her entourage walked in. I started to rise, and then realized I would be the only one doing so when I remembered the instructions given to the inmates. No standing, no approaching her, no talking to her, stay in your seat.

I was shocked at how tiny she was, how thin and fragile she looked as she walked to the front of the room, her shoulders slightly rounded and bent forward. She didn't look so delicate on television. But here, in person, she looked like a little bird in a bright red, skirted suit. Someone introduced her and everyone applauded politely.

I listened intently to the governor's speech, as I wanted to hear everything she had to say to us. I was also star-struck. This was *before* she was chosen as John McCain's running mate. Now, in 2010, she can raise \$300,000 in a single evening's speaking engagement. I got to hear her for free! Wow! Imagine that.

The governor and the inmates were brought together at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center that day because of Wyatt, the first service dog graduate of our dog-training program.

Wyatt was being presented to a wounded Alaskan veteran. Besides Governor Palin and the Dept. of Corrections VIPs, there were officers representing every branch of the military, plus members of the wounded soldier's family and Army unit. It was a happy, but stressful event because of all the important people there.

The previous day, when I learned that Governor Palin was going to come to my humble prison home, I told my job supervisor, Sgt. L., "I want to meet her. I'd shake her hand and say, 'Hi, I'm one of the people you want to kill with the death penalty.'"

"You better not!" Sgt. L. said. She knew I was joking and I would not really say that to Governor Palin. That year one of our Alaska state legislators wanted to introduce new death penalty legislation, and it had been reported that Governor Palin said she would support it if it came to her desk. In reality, it wouldn't apply to me because my case had been closed and dispensed with, but the death penalty was still a scary thought.

Governor Palin delivered her speech and, although I could barely see her from where I was sitting, there was no mistaking her voice. She sounded just like she sounded on TV: confident and feminine with a lilt of laughter or irony or sarcasm, or whatever you want to call it that makes it Sarah Palin's unique and recognizable voice.

She talked about strength, perseverance, and overcoming obstacles so that we could achieve our "God-given destiny." *God-given destiny?* She used that phrase at least twice in her speech to us. I've thought a lot about God, fate and destiny, choice and free will during my fifteen years in prison. Was it my victim's God-given destiny to be murdered by me through no fault of his own? Was it God-given destiny that I be stricken with mental illness? Was it God-given destiny that my daughter become, in effect, an orphan? No. I do not believe that.

What I do believe about what happens in any person's life are in the words of a 1980s pop song: "One thing leads to another." That's it. We're all connected. We think or say or do something and that sends ripples of influence all around us. One thought causes something, which leads to something else, which leads to something else, which leads to a victory or a meltdown, depending on which direction we're going.

I was very mentally ill before I killed that poor man, and I begged anyone and everyone for help. I went to a large Anchorage church for help. An assistant pastor spoke with me for fifteen minutes, told me I wasn't resisting the devil strongly enough, then dismissed me. Did the devil make me do it? Please. I'll tell you exactly what happened. One thing led to another, which led to another and another, which led to the present moment.

I was in the hole for most of the first three years I was in prison. "The hole" meaning locked in a small cell for 23 hours a day for almost three years. One of my current wingmates recently asked, "Diana, do you remember when you used to stand in your cell at Sixth Avenue jail and rock side to side and growl?"

"No!" I said with a laugh. "I remember rocking back and forth, and walking in circles, but I don't remember growling."

"You sure as shit did! You were scary back then. You were off the chain!"

There's a lot I don't remember about that sad and frightening time of my life. Was it God-given destiny that I end up in that dark, lonely cell? Or was it God-given destiny that I live a completely different, wonderful life but I just screwed it up?

Luckily for everyone, we *can* change direction. Unfortunately, *I* didn't change direction until after I murdered someone.

What finally pulled me out of the darkness that had become my mind and my life? Medication helped significantly. Still, I struggled. One day in 1999, two years after I got out of the hole, I was agitated and couldn't calm my mind. I knew I was having a spiritual crisis, but didn't know what to do. A thought occurred to me. *Buddhists always look calm. Maybe that can help me.* I ran to my wing and looked up Buddhist groups in the phone book. There was only one listed, the Anchorage Zen Community (AZC). I called and left a voice-mail message. A few days later the phone rang in the main dayroom. It was a woman calling from AZC for me. You have to understand that we are almost never allowed incoming phone calls. I never found out who let that call through, but I will be thankful for the rest of my life for that kindness.

Because of my call two women from AZC, Judith and Karen, became religious volunteers and began teaching Zen meditation and Buddhist philosophy to inmates hungry to make changes in their lives. Judith has continued coming for the last eleven years and has become my mentor. Her lovely, intelligent blue eyes behind her glasses show her genuine interest in inmates' lives when we talk to her. We can tell she cares by her thoughtful answers to our bewildering problems. She willingly shares her life experiences with us.

When Judith and her husband drove up to Alaska in the 1960s, they picked up a hitchhiker and delivered him to where he was going. At this man's house they met his roommate, another young man who was Buddhist. Judith watched him as he sat on a cushion in his bedroom and meditated. All of his belongings consisted of a bed, a cushion and a few clothes. This man's aura of peace, in spite of his lack of material possessions profoundly affected Judith, who soon began her own study and practice of Buddhism because of this encounter. She told me that man has no idea how much he influenced her; so much that it eventually led to the establishment of the Anchorage Zen Community, and in turn, led to her

teaching us out here. She taught us that it was an example of how we're all connected and how we don't always know exactly what or who our actions will influence.

In the beginning, when I complained about being in prison, her answer was, "There is no alternate universe where you're not in prison. You're here. You have to deal with what's happening right now."

When my mother died I called Judith and wailed, "She died before I could forgive her!"

"Diana, guilt is useless," she assured me, in her calm and loving voice.

At one Buddhist meeting I complained about someone intentionally bumping into me numerous times on the walkway. Judith asked me, "Is there a rule against people touching each other?"

"That's a stupid question," I snapped.

Tears began to silently fall out of Judith's eyes.

"Oh great, now I made you cry."

"No, Diana, *I cried.*"

She had just come from a retreat and was emotionally raw and vulnerable. I had treated her unfairly, but she didn't say so.

Over the past eleven years, my friend and mentor took a sad, angry, self-centered and mentally ill woman under her wing and helped her become compassionate, grateful and at peace.

After one of our meetings, I was troubled. I told her, "I don't even have anyone to claim my body when I die." Without batting an eye, she said, "I will." And I know she will, if I need her to.

Through Zen Buddhist meditation and contemplation, I have learned about myself—all the ugly, dark and scary stuff: the fear, self-pity, anger and deep sadness; and, surprisingly, some good stuff too: a sense of humor, intelligence, compassion and true remorse.

Judith has told me more than once that we are a lot alike. This is a compliment to me and gives me hope. When I'm trying to decide what to do in a given situation, I often think, WWJD? Not, what would Jesus do, but what would Judith do? What would be the *unselfish* thing to do right now? When I think of Judith I always imagine her smiling, dressed as always in blue, and asking me thoughtful questions and giving me helpful advice. Was it God-given destiny that had me meet Judith? I don't think so. I think one thing led to another, choices were made, and here we are.

Has Judith inspired me? Definitely. Did Governor Palin's speech that day in our gym inspire me? Not really. Of course, Judith has been coming here for eleven years and Governor Palin was here for only an hour. On the other hand, Sarah Palin has inspired thousands of other people around the country.

What's the difference between these two inspirational women? When Sarah Palin speaks to people, she walks out to jubilant applause. When Judith comes to prison we all take off our shoes, plop down on the floor, and she says, "Okay, let's start with ankle rolls, first the right, then the left." Sarah Palin gives speeches to her fans. Judith rolls up her sleeves and does the dirty work. Palin talks about what other people should do. Judith does what she can to help other people. She comes to prison and she teaches and loves murderers, bank robbers and chronic alcoholics. Palin mocks others who are trying their best to make positive changes in the world. Judith listens quietly as women such as I selfishly rant about our situation in the world, and then helps us become calm, grateful and willing to comfort others who are suffering.

Judith, my friend and mentor, is enthusiastic about life, her spiritual practice, and helping people. She once sent a card to me in which she wrote, "I'm here through heaven and hell." And I know, *I know* she will be.

That's the difference between talking the talk and walking the walk.

I wonder what would happen if people just helped each other and stopped mocking personalities and arguing about ideas. There is a time and place for debate, but there is so much hostility and bitterness among people right now that it sometimes looks hopeless. Nevertheless, I can tell you that there are Judiths in this world who *are* making positive changes; men and women who will never give speeches to thousands of people and will never get media attention, but who take a hopeless woman or a hopeless situation and transform them.

Diana W [REDACTED]
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