

Brother's

Illinois

IF THE WALLS COULD TALK

Words impact our lives. Some words impacting my life are change, strength, perception, fear, anger, and love. Because of these words I am surviving. It is very difficult and lonely at times. I find positive in all of my challenges and try to overcome them. Don't get me wrong, it is hard to find the positive in a lot of situations. My friends always comment on how strong I am, and how God gives you what you can handle. I should be Hercules, however I am not. I just know I have to keep going and not slow down. If I slowed down it would mean defeat; the defeat of living life.

Everyone has a story to tell about themselves. I have a story, a very humbling story. It is not the kind of humble people think of when they sit in a church pew, or are in the comfort of their home; or even surrounded by their family. This is the kind of humility you learn when you are completely stripped of all pride, dignity, race, religion, class, or sex. BARE. NAKED. No soul. It reminds me of people who were in concentration camps, POW's, the Civil War, the Great Depression, even more recently, 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, Haiti; great traumatic events. There are stories among those lives as well. So, why should mine be any different? We hear of these life altering events, see them on TV, read the internet, or just pass the stories from person to person. Until you are personally touched or go through this type of experience (prison)—you do not understand. “We”, society, draw lines, set boundaries, set standards, and stereo type. “We” think in parameters and form sub-cultures designed to keep people in ~~the~~ orderly classifications. “We” do this to ease “our” minds. The reality of easing our minds is we want to erase bad memories relating to past times, events, struggles, places, or people from our life. Wouldn't it be wonderful to sift out the bad vs. good and only keep the good?

Change; it is a profound word. It got a black man elected into the presidency. People actually fear change. This fear is what drives us to seek out the security of drawing lines, setting stereotypes, titles, and categorize people into neat, tidy boxes. This is where I struggle with what happened to me, and how I dealt with my experience. I am still struggling to recover. There are so many hurtful comments people made to me after I shocked them with committing a crime. The whole thing was so out of character for me; people were dumbfounded. A lot of people making these comments were friends and family. What they failed to realize is I had changed. I am still changing. Evolving to form who we are is part of life. People forget this part of life. It is often scary to them and they forget we all change over time. I am still changing and it is a wonderful process.

Prior to sentencing I had people say things that were very hurtful to me. "It's only your freedom." My thought was well you give yours up and see how that works for you. "It's like you are preparing your own funeral." To some people, while I was gone; I was dead. "I am done with her!" Well let me tell you; I knew you felt that way while I was in prison. People do treat you as if you are dead. The saying 'out of sight, out of mind' is true. Oh, an occasional card or letter may float through to you, but you are temporarily forgotten. Oh my most favorite thing said to me while I was gone was this, "you have nothing but time." I sure did have the time. I handle things with deflective humor. So when my day in court came (the day that changed my life forever) all I could say was this, "Just how do you dress for prison?" I had hoped for probation. Obviously that did not happen.

Perception shapes and affects all of us. Unfortunately, we allow this to happen. We believe the gossip without any validation. It is no different in prison. There are

groups, clichés, pecking orders, and of course there are leaders. The emotions are bottled up. I was told not to cry while I was in prison. I cried more there than I ever had in my life. It was okay. The other women would let you have those moments. I would be vulnerable and exposed. It would come back to bite me at times, but vulnerability hurts just as much on the outside of prison walls. I observed a lot of things about people. Some women were tough. Some were manipulating. Some enjoyed being manipulated. The sex, sex roles, humiliation, was mortifying. Boy/girls, girlfriends, Boo's, wives, guys, husbands, sugar daddy's, and correctional officers flirting—it was just unreal behavior and crazy relationships.

I was familiar with uniforms. I have been in both kinds now. I have an education, being the non-typical prisoner. I am simply a person that experienced many difficult and tragic events in my life. Those shaped me and shaped me to choose to commit my crime. I was judgmental and believed the worst in people. I learned in prison to be humble, not judge people. The saying comes to mind, 'it is better to be judged by twelve, than carried by six'. Really? Prior to my crime I felt I was judged by everyone in my life at that time. I had considered the carried by six option, prior to prison because I was scared and did not want them to know my previous career. I am glad I did not act on that thought. I think that being in prison is like surviving the horrible tragedies I spoke of earlier. You either get stronger or grow being enriched by the experience. You survive the best you can succumbing to unimaginable roles. Or you give up and keep going back to prison because that is easier to deal with in your life, thus you lose. I like to think I am a better person and was shaped by my experience. I carry the experience with me daily. But, prison is just like any other government type of organization.

A person comes in and gets a uniform. All of the sudden many personalities, backgrounds, and cultures suddenly thrown in to one big melting pot. Placed into the same uniforms, given the same amount of supplies, and expected to all of sudden conform to rules and regulations when most of the women never have had to conform to these types of rules. Just like the military and police structures. This only brings out the greed in people. Money sent in to the women often gave the women power and ability to manipulate. We were often degraded by peers then the degraded by the correctional officers. One of my bunkies was "Patches". She was a prostitute strung out on crack living on the streets of Chicago. She had been in prison too many times to count. She had lived on the streets and continued to act that way while locked up. She had no idea what manners, simple eating habits were, or even hygiene techniques. We had a toilet that would not work in our cell. The correctional officers told us too bad. We would go to the bathroom when we were let out of our cells to go eat. We were often ridiculed the whole time by the correctional officers about having to go to the bathroom and then to hurry up in using the toilet. We did not get the toilet fixed for several days. We would be yelled at and sent back to our cells while in line waiting to eat for simply looking the wrong way at a correctional officer. I know from my past that this is all to create discipline and learn how to conform to rules. None the less it is very stressful and degrading. A huge accomplishment for the women while in a two man cell was getting the opportunity to be on the bottom bunk. It seems so simple, but it is a position of authority or rank or earned status. There were certain correctional officers that showed favoritism, or the opposite would harass certain inmates. Sometimes there was no rhyme or reason to why this happened. Just as in society it comes back to personal prejudices and preferences.

The state wants to set up structure, rules, discipline, yet it is all about who you know. It is an inmate knowing when to be seen, and when not to be seen. It an inmate knowing when to keep your mouth shut or not shut. I would compare my experience as one of complete loneliness. I did not conform to the groups or clichés or get into the bad groups. I would stand alone on a lot of things. I participated in every activity I could. I did the time and did not let the time do me. I observed people and tried not to get involved in the drama. It was entertaining to watch at times. I learned a lot about human behavior. I had been to a police training academy and it was a very similar experience. I was often conflicted and entertained to watch both the inmates and the correctional officers. The only real difference was the uniforms. There were clichés in both. There were lines drawn and crossed by both groups. There was too much drama for me involved in both groups. There were friendships/~~relationships~~ formed in both groups as well. Among each group a bond was formed, and on a rare occasions the uniform lines were crossed. The only thing saving either group from discipline was discretion or knowing the right person in a position of authority to save you from ruin. But that did not always block the rumors or gossip about people and their relationships. Again, a majority of the time the rumors and gossip were just ~~that~~ rumors and gossip. The sad thing was they were often believed with no validation to them. This is where the greatest causalities in careers or prison terms occurred. The character assassination attacks often ended friendships, careers, or put women into segregation. It often would impact whether women were accepted into groups, classes, or even able to attend events held for their rehabilitation or benefit while incarcerated. To me this was the most devastating thing to watch. One rumor could

prevent a woman from ~~caring~~ or ~~trying~~ to benefit herself to become someone better. Once flagged as a problem, and being in such a small facility, the inmate is branded with the label. Any rumor could label an inmate as something they are not ^{for} their whole sentence. Unfortunately, the label whether true or not would stick and travel with them even when they would move to a new housing unit. The correctional officers, support staff, and other inmates would all know the label and spread it around. Some of the labels that come to my mind are a fair correctional officer, a strict correctional officer, a flirt, a good inmate giving people no problems, a flirty inmate, a boy/girl, a goody two shoe, a nark, a commissary whore (someone who will do anything and be with anyone to get extra commissary), and the list is endless. All of these rumors and labels could get correctional officers as well as inmates into a lot of trouble ^{could get them out of trouble.}

I do not have the same perception of people or life for that matter as I did prior to incarceration. I do not try to put my judgment on others and I don't pay too much attention to what other people perceive of me. I let others ^{carry their own} baggage and problems ^{especially their} perception of me. It is not my baggage, and I do not have to conform to what they think. I am changed. I do not mind change and never have. I always embrace it. I even wrote a meditation about how change is really about flexibility. Bend, twist, and hold together like a rubber band—just don't snap. My thought is change is great because if you don't like the new way, it too can be changed. My knowledge that change will always be a constant in life is what made me know ^{my sentence} would pass and it was not forever.

I did take from my experience to learn to pay attention to what I say to other people. This came from having had so many horrible things said to me. Some of these

comments were as follows: "you don't want your children to see you here?" No, but I do want to see my children. Another one, "you're getting use to taking handouts." No, I am pained and humbled every time I receive charity. The worst thing said to me was, "you lost the right to be a parent when you committed your crime." No, I still gave birth to two children and we still unconditionally love one another. "The state sets you free to put the burden of supporting you onto someone else when you are let out." No, it is called being supportive in a time of need.

I believe that a "how to" book on prison survival is not really necessary. What would we call it: Prison for Idiots? I think society believes the people in prison are idiots anyway. I joked and said there is not a charge yet for aggravated ignorance, however, most crimes are committed due to human ignorance and indulgence. Some of the most creative, brilliant, beautiful people I have met in my life were with me while I was in prison. People conform to their environments. We adapt and do what we need to do in order to survive. Sometimes it is not what others may expect out of us. Sometimes we can't believe we are acting the way we do. But we are locked up and surviving the best way we know how. This accomplishment or attitude is how you get through the day. It is no different than being outside the prison walls. Inside the walls a little community is formed and developed. I feel that some women lie and act out in order to find their own survival technique. They are simply trying to find themselves, or in some cases lose themselves from what they were outside the walls. This trial and error process is simply a way to deal with prison life. Many women were able to become completely different people because they wanted to adapt to the prison environment. Sometimes, the change was for the better and taught them to be strong independent women. Unfortunately, there

were women that chose to become less than their potential. Some women would go to segregation over and over, because it was expected and easier for them to do this. Some women would dress up in makeup. Maybe so they could mask the person they saw in their reflection. Some women became aggressive or flirtatious. Some became boy/girls and had never been interested in a same sex relationship ever in their life. Some became everyone's friend in order to get something from them. The women surprising me the most were the one's tapping into their creative side. These women were poets, rappers, artists, writers, students, theatrical participants, athletes, and goal achievers. These were women discovering their great gifts. Often they were never exposed or allowed to expose these gifts while going through their daily lives "in the world".

The best survival and integrity is with 'old timers'. These are the women having been incarcerated for many years and have many years to complete. Some of these women are there longer than a correctional officer's career. They are the source of information about prison and survival in such an environment. They often have a great and hopeful outlook on life. Unfortunately, these are also the women getting short changed in being allowed to participate in many classes and groups held for the women in order to rehabilitate and educate. Because they are going to be there and do not have an upcoming release date; they are not allowed to go to groups, classes, or seminars. This is horrible. Most of their time is spent doing nothing and waiting. Even if they took the classes over a few times, I fell it would be better than wasting a person's time and potential away. This is one thing I feel most definitely needs to change within the system.

I survived by being active. I kept busy as much as I could. I would read, exercise, attend all classes and events I could. I did this to better myself and to not focus on where

I was; but rather where I was going. I also focused on the person I wanted to become once I was released. It is still difficult and very challenging. I feel the experience has taught me to be a better mother, friend, daughter, and humanitarian. I know the experience has given me drive to never give up, ^{while I find} a new way to live life. I could not have survived without my family and friends. I am aware and embrace this knowledge. I also would not wish prison life onto anyone. It was what I had to go through to be a better "me". I am grateful and thankful my children continue to love me unconditionally. They were my focus; and they still are. I love the Bible verse about love in I Corinthians 13: 4-7. It is what drives people to survive. In my opinion human survival is essential through love, never losing faith, being hopeful, and enduring. It is my love for and from others that was essential to my survival in prison. I also think strength is needed. I live by this anonymous quote referencing strength: "when you go through hardships and decide not to surrender—that is strength. Strength is born in the deep silence of long suffering and love, not amid joy. It doesn't come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will." I have learned sometimes there are no answers to questions we have throughout life. These are the "why" questions. So when posed the question, how do people survive in prison. I would say probably the same way they would survive any other traumatic event facing them. Each person will respond in their own way, and adapt to the best of their capabilities. Just do it. Just keep surviving hopefully learning from mistakes made along the way.