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Reading In Prison: Why I Need To Know

On my locker is a stack of books that fills the space between the lower and upper metal boxes bolted to the wall. In a world too often devoid of books, my collection of heavy, hardbound reference works is a source of constant attention from my fellow prisoners and the guards.

After cell searches, I've spent half an hour explaining the difference between a dictionary, a usage dictionary, a biographical dictionary, and a dictionary of philosophy. Why I need more than one book labeled "dictionary" tends to perplex and annoy the authorities.

Why I need three books of quotations, two style manuals, two kinds of one-volume encyclopedia, a couple of desk references, an almanac and an atlas, a pile of market books for writers -- there never seems to be an adequate enough explanation to satisfy the merely curious or the petty, rules before reason, guard.

Over the years, I've been forced to reduce my personal library down to the requisite ten several times, but I just can't whittle down my need to know to such a confined space.

And that's what it is, really, my need to know.

I'm the go-to-guy for settling debates about historical matters, politics, and the deeper, truer meanings of obscure words. At least once a week someone comes to me to ask for a definition. The most recent being what is the word for words that spell two different words backwards and forward. (e.g.: God and dog.) My answer was that I didn't know, but I'd try and find out.

It goes much deeper than the simple sense of being useful, pleasant as that is, to be sure. I live in a place that is a kind of reverse, parallel universe to the free world when it comes to the free flow of information. Even though the U.S. Supreme Court once ruled, back in the freethinking '70s, that the Constitution doesn't stop at the front gates of a prison, access to information is

securely locked out. The very thought of having all the world's knowledge sitting in an interactive box on my desk makes my mouth water.

But prisons are run by the most technophobic people on earth. The thinking, such as it is, seems to be that were we to have access to the internet all freedom-loving people would be in immediate jeopardy. That, and we would be able to magically transport ourselves out of prison through the computer's screen. I'm not sure how prisoners could do any more harm than the malicious hackers and scam-artists of the free world already do, nevertheless, we won't be surfing the web anytime soon.

Concurrently, and just as sadly, the funding for our libraries has been eviscerated over the past decade as the bill for a generation of "lock 'em all up" policies came due. When overcrowding results in skyrocketing costs the money for nonessential things like reference books is first on the chopping block. The past several years here in California, home to both the biggest budget deficits and the biggest prison system in the country, have seen the outright elimination of library funds.

When the volcano in Iceland recently erupted its cloud of disruptive ash, I went right to my National Geographic Collegiate Atlas to get a better sense of things. Next, my Columbia Encyclopedia gave me a short course in volcanology and a brief history of Iceland, too. An hour later, after following some related threads through the World Almanac and Book of Facts and reading about a couple of notable people in my Chamber's Biographical Dictionary, I knew enough to better grasp the situation.

This is just one example. More times than I can count, I've gone on a hunt for some bit of knowledge to help illuminate my understanding of the wider world. In these places, it's too easy to allow the concrete walls to suffocate our minds, our curiosity. When that happens, human beings die in a profound way, devolving to unthinking brutes that truly believe vast, secret conspiracies are arrayed against them, that racial and tribal loyalties require the fear and loathing of others, and that there is no path to enlightenment.

And that's why 70% of prisoners come back to prison after they're released. The bonds that hold too many of us are not made of concrete and steel, they are of much stronger stuff.

While the accumulation of knowledge is not an end in itself, the free flow of information acts as a potent disinfectant against the terrible byproducts of ignorance. I've often wondered, what would happen if every new arrival was issued a dictionary and an up-to-date almanac along with his state cup and brown boots?

If you'd like to read more about prison, check out the author's memoir, Mother California: A Story of Redemption Behind Bars (Atlas & Co. 2009).

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