

My journey involves letting go of the life I expected and thought I deserved, and living the life I have.

Who would you be if you lost your job? Your limbs? Your eyesight? Your parents? Your children? Your freedom? Your youth? Your sex appeal? Your health? Your potence? Your mobility? Your good looks? Your family? Your voice? Who are you now without all of these things? Is your life still worth living? What do you stand for? What do you believe? Who is the person you see? Now, be that person!

When everything is taken away, what is left? For me, the experience of coming to prison has been life changing, and I have the choice to frame it positively if I like.

My life has always been filled with things I used to define myself. As an addict, I didn't know who I was, and I used drugs and other things to make me feel better. As I've aged, all that "stuff" has become less important, because it's superficial. Strip away the looks, the teeth, the job, the freedom, and what is left? I have three years ~~to~~ define who I am and think about my life's meaning.

The human journey is inevitably to a moment where there is nothing left but ourselves and God. For some of us, that happens at the end of our life, at the time of our death; after death, opportunity ceases to exist. But for some lucky ones of us, a moment like that may happen in the middle of our life as a result of circumstances over which we may or may not have control.

Prison is a good example of this -- life threatening illness is another. When this happens, we are forced to be reborn, and we then have the opportunity to redefine ourselves and our lives with a renewed sense of self and purpose.

"Everything we have done in our lives up until now prepares us for where we are now." I have heard this sentence or something like it, echoed in all sorts of self-help philosophies. What does it mean that I am in prison now? (A place that I've always defined in my thoughts as bad). For me to remain positive, I need to eliminate the words "good" and "bad" from my vocabulary -- they are self imposed judgements which limit my experience. My life has been an amazing journey up until now, and God willing, my life will continue to amaze. I choose to think of this experience as interesting, rather than good or bad.

In a way, coming here is like walking into AA for the first time. I remember my first few years in AA, waiting on the sidelines for someone to invite me to participate. I really didn't have any social skills, and I didn't know how to interact with people. For some reason, I missed these lessons growing up. My parents were scientists and their friends were academics. My childhood friends and I were intellectually precocious, but not so developed socially, and it didn't matter then. But when I left that environment, I was scared; I didn't know how to behave, what to say or how to act.

I became very good at assessing a situation, taking notes on what you all were doing and then mimicking your actions so that I

could fit in. I was a chameleon of sorts. I'd go to the places you went, do the things you did, wear similar types of clothing, drive a similar car, and the list goes on. This behavior worked briefly for me, but in behaving this way, I'm not being authentic, and eventually, this creates a problem. People can sense inauthenticity -- maybe not at first, but over time they feel something isn't right. My words and my actions don't quite match up. A little slip occurs here and there; I respond inappropriately. No real connection happens, because connection is impossible when I'm an imposter.

This was and still is my problem. I can very easily slip back into this type of thinking and behavior. Walking into prison makes me acutely aware of this possibility, because my first instinct is to recoil in fear. Strange how that uncomfortable place feels comfortable to me. So what can I do to combat this problem?

I have to really spend some time getting to know myself without all the stuff with which I previously defined myself. I must get naked. I have to discover what I stand for and what I won't tolerate. I have to look deep into myself, see myself as I really am, and then accept and love that person. This means loving the whole me -- the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. Everything that exists in God's world has an opposite, and the whole is a combination of the trait and it's opposite. Without the opposite of a trait, we cannot recognize the trait itself. We are by definition, whole. We therefore embody everything in our ourselves.

Every bit of me makes me unique, and I am perfect in God's world. When I accept myself and present myself authentically and entirely to the world, I find acceptance in the world. At the same time, my challenge is to also accept and love without judgement, every other soul. Sounds like a lot? It is, but I don't have to do it perfectly. In fact, accepting imperfection is the goal. Once I know who I am, all I need to do is be me.

I am forty seven years old. I am a drug addict and I am clean and sober. I am humble, and I am an arrogant son-of-a-bitch. I am flexible and I am rigid. I am compassionate, and I am unforgiving. My body is incarcerated now, but my mind is free most of the time, except when I limit myself. I am grateful, and from time to time, I am bitter. I am courageous, and I am afraid. I desire perfection, and I always fall short. In falling short, I achieve perfection. I am everything and I am nothing. I am in prison, and this is my life now.

What follows, is a series of emails I sent my friends during the first three weeks in June called "Greetings from Camp Fed." They address issues which illustrate my struggle, and how I live in that struggle daily.

Greetings from Camp Fed - June 1, 2015:

Happy Monday all! I continue my writing. May^{be} this is my purpose now. You understand the irony here? Of course writing is my purpose, because it's what I'm doing; and truly, there is no better place to write without distraction, than here. What

follows is a story about something that happened to me last week. And then the second part is what happens to me later that week. There will be some developing plot twists what are dependent on my actions, which at the time of this writing, remain to be seen. I guess the important thing I'm noticing -- meaningful experience happens in life no matter where we are. The bigger question, am I so busy worrying about what I'm not, and about where I'm not, that I miss the meaning here and now?

I had a God moment recently. You may not understand the meaning at first, but I'll get to the explanation shortly. There's a guy here. I don't know his name. He reminds me of my father, at least in the way he looks. He has salt and pepper hair and a porn-stache. He's the camp plumber. I think he's been down for a long time, because he has that demeanor. You can tell those guys: they have routines and they seem at peace, which is weird to me given the circumstances. As an example, he sits in the same seat in the dining hall for every meal. That is his seat. "Plumber Man," which is what I'll call him -- he's obviously a man's man. And indication -- one of his hobbies is wood carving. I watch him carve boats which he then paints. Plumber Man doesn't live in my dorm. I just see him occasionally in passing, but one night I have reason to be in Plumber Man's dorm. I'm visiting with an acquaintance to discuss something or another, and I see Plumber Man sitting in his bunk. His back is against the wall and he's quietly knitting with red yarn, which blows me away.

One of my struggles has always been getting comfortable with me.

I believe my inherent uncomfortability with myself is a predicated factor in my addiction -- it has always been a challenge for me. I am gay, HIV positive, meth addicted, currently toothless former fashion model who has a lot of insecurities about the way I look. I can tell you that I feel safer and more comfortable when I'm writing -- especially when I'm writing to my friends. But put me in a room of strangers, and suddenly, being me creates anxiety and fear in me.

I know God does not want me to be afraid, but sometimes I am. So what does God do? Suddenly, I find myself in a place, that in order to live, I will have to face my fears. Why face my fears now? Because I am tired of fear's debilitating effect on my life. Living with fear is exhausting. I've mentioned before, prison scares me in several ways. One of my biggest fears involves being gay, HIV positive and living among all the straight men and what I perceive to be their judgement of me, (which I'm well aware is really my judgement of myself.) I know I'm a work still in progress. My challenge, while incarcerated is to create a life for myself here. This means being myself and being honest with others about who I am in spite of my fear.

Earlier in the week, I attend an AA meeting, and a man shares about his life. While locked up, his wife, the mother of his children, fell back into addiction. Time passes and fortunately, she has gotten herself back into treatment and is taking care of herself. Unfortunately, now she is HIV positive, or as he says, "She has AIDS." In my head I'm thinking, I need to speak with this man -- I need to tell him that I've been positive for

twenty one years and I'm as healthy now as I've ever been. I can give him hope, because right now, he is afraid and hopeless about his baby mama. I know this is what God wants me to do, but I'm afraid to have this conversation with him, because I'm afraid to be me. Obviously, I still have work to do. I think back to Plumber Man camped out on his top bunk in a room full of testosterone with his yarn and knitting needles. If he can do that, I know I can help my AA fellow. I'll let you know how things turn out.

Greetings from Camp Fed - June 5, 2015:

Further thoughts about Plumber Man. My buddy Chip has been locked up for nine years. He's sixty two -- he was indicted ~~by~~ the Feds late in the 20th century. At that time, he was offered a three year plea bargain. He maintains his innocence as do his lawyers. The prosecutors said it wasn't their best case, but they run with it none the less. His first trial ended with a hung jury, and he lost the second trial and ^{is} subsequently sentenced to seventeen and a half years. Two million dollars later, and he lost his appeal. Chip continues to maintain his innocence. He's been sober twenty eight years, and he's deeply spiritual. I don't think he's prone to lying, but what Chip and I think doesn't matter. He has lost everything -- his wife, his son, his business. He doesn't have a dime to his name.

Since Chip has been down for a while, and since he's an AA fellow, I've grown to trust him. He also has that peaceful demeanor. I asked him if he has any real friends here, because

that's a question which has been on my mind of late. He tell me, "not really." He says he has a small circle of people he can go to with problems, but folks here come and go so frequently, it's hard to create and maintain meaningful relationships. This makes me sad, though as I type this message, it occurs to me, that is one reason why a meaningful relationship with God is so crucial here. Earthly things and people come and go, but a relationship with God transcends time. I would like to have a strong relationship with God, but I would also like to have some good friends on earth.

Chip has been trying to initiate a relationship with his now eight year old son. His then wife brought his son, (who was conceived during his second trial,) to see him until his son was eighteen months old, but when Chip lost his appeal, his wife left him and took his boy. Chip told me about the times he would walk the prison track with tears streaming down his face, asking "why God?" It has been six years since she took his son away, and Chip has been making an effort to have a relationship with his son all this time. Last week, he received a note in the mail from his ex-wife. The note read, "Call on Sunday at one to speak with your son." He called and spoke to his boy; he will continue calling on Sundays. This is a huge victory and so meaningful for Chip. The joy is palpable -- just a phone call, but the best thing ever. That such a simple thing as a phone call can mean so much is a powerful example of this truth for those of us who are incarcerated.

I'm grateful Chip shared his situation with me, so in turn, I

share my fear about the "gay HIV thing" with him. I let him read my last Camp Fed installment about Plumber Man and my God moment. In it, I describe my fear about disclosing my HIV status here in prison. So sharing this entry with Chip is my first small step towards walking through the fear I described. Chip and I talked as friends for over an hour that day. He suggests developing a circle of trust in which I include a few guys with whom I can be honest. It's good advice I will take to heart.

Yesterday, Chip asked me if I'd had the conversation with my fellow AA about his baby mama's recent HIV diagnosis. That's the thing about friends; hopefully they listen and they call us on our shit. "Not yet Chip, not yet," I say. Ugh! I know what I have to do. I pray for the courage to be me and to share me honestly.

Greetings from Camp Fed - June 8, 2015:

If you have been following my Camp Fed installments, you're aware I've been addressing personal fears and searching for my purpose. On the fear front, I've made some progress, but more progress is needed. I have yet to disclose my HIV status to Baby Mama guy. I'm waiting for the right time, at least that's the story I tell myself. But will the right time ever present itself? I'm thinking probably not. Maybe I need to create that moment, but that's easier said than done. The problem with my fear -- it tricks me into believing there are legitimate reasons and circumstances why I shouldn't act. Part of me says, "I don't want to be involved," and "It isn't my responsibility." Then

my authentic enlightened self says, "Why not me?" and "For God's sake, just do it." When I'm stuck in ambivalence, I think prayer is the answer. "God, or something, please give me the strength and the opportunity to walk through my fear."

I'll digress for a moment. I am Norwegian and Welsh. My ancestors must have been hairy, because I'm hairy. I have a hairy chest, legs, arms and butt. Fortunately, my back isn't hairy yet -- not that there's anything wrong with that. My straight and lady friends are probably unaware the ongoing debate in the gay community involving body hair and the advantages or disadvantages of being smooth, shaved, clipped or hairy. Personally, I prefer to clip on a regular basis. As you also may remember, I've been running a lot. I wear a tank top when I run since it's summer in Florida. Those of you from Florida may be familiar with the scenario I'm about to describe. (Maybe this happens in other parts of the country as well.) I'm outside walking, when I suddenly find myself engulfed in a swarming cloud of tiny black gnats. They buzz around me bouncing off my face, and sticking to any parts of me that is sweaty. They get in my hair, my ears, my eyes and my mouth. I occasionally find myself in the midst of one of these swarms, and my ungroomed body hair presents a problem, because gnats are getting stuck in it. While running, I look down at my chest and find a family of gnats has taken up residence in the hairy thicket that has grown on my chest. This is the last straw!

It's time to manscape, so I speak to my inmate barber, John. I told you about him -- he's seventy two and he's still patiently

waiting for the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to release him. He told me previously, that ^{he} his provides the manscaping service, but not below the waist -- not that I would seriously consider this option even if it were available. Clippers are rare on the compound, because they can be turned into tattoo guns, but John has a set, so I decide to take the plunge. It's going to cost me two tunas and two mackerels, or five dollars since I'm hairy and it's a big job. I wonder how this process is going to work. I'm forced to address another fear of mine -- taking my shirt off on the prison compound and being shirtless in front of whomever is around -- this because clipping will take place outside rather than inside so we don't make a mess. I'm terrified; what will they think when they see me shirtless with my redneck tan getting a body clipping from a seventy two year old man? Will they be turned to stone from seeing this horrible sight as if witnessing the hideous mythical Medusa? Will they all guffaw? Will they ROTFLOA (actually roll on the floor and laugh their proverbial asses off?) The anticlimactic answer? Nobody noticed and nobody cared. All that mental anguish I put myself through for nothing. And that is the thing about fear -- for me, it tends to be anticlimactic. It's usually all in my head, and most of the times, nobody cares. My fear is my fear, and it rarely manifests in other people. "It's never that serious," is what I like to tell myself these days. So now, my challenge is take this knowledge and apply it to my situation with Baby Mama guy.

What is extremely serious, is the problem I have with my body hair clipping job. As promised, John the barber stopped at my

waist, which I knew he would. So I now appear to be wearing hair leggings which end at my waist, and this presents another problem entirely. Sigh! Not that I'm trying to be sexy here, but I wonder to myself, "will anybody be attracted to goat boy?" Please don't answer that question.

On a different note, I'm chairing the Camp AA meeting for the month of June. I'm bribing people to attend using Little Debbie oatmeal pies. It's a small price to pay to get folks to attend the meeting. My first topic involve a discussion about how we used to be, how we want to be, and how to bridge the gap. In preparing for the meeting, I realize I have often done things because of how I want people to perceive me. I want to be perfect. I thought you would like me better if I was perfect. At forty seven, I am realizing just how ridiculous this notion is. I mean, honestly, does anyone really like perfect people? They're actually annoying, which means I've spent all this time trying to fit in, using perfection as the means, and it turns out being imperfect, or just being me, is the better strategy. From time to time -- OK, all the time -- I still engage in head games around this issue. For instance, I tend to run faster when I'm passing somebody on the track, because I want them to think I'm a better runner than I am. In meditation, when we chant as a group, I go to great lengths to chant correctly and on key. Forget that the reason I'm chanting is to clear my mind -- for me, chanting gives me something new about which to obsess. You may also remember my job on the compound is cleaning the tables and floors in the chow hall. Since I believe I clean tables perfectly, from time to time, I find myself going back and re-

doing other inmates jobs because they haven't completed their job up to my high standards.

I know all of these behaviors are a little crazy, but I still find myself engaging in them. Those old patterns still crop up in the new enlightened me. And I don't think I'm the only one who has experienced this phenomenon. I guess the new enlightened me needs to accept that there will always be a little "old crazy me," lurking just beneath my shiny new enlightened exterior. At least today, I can laugh at myself, which is a damn good thing, since I'm wearing hair leggings as I type this email.

Greetings from Camp Fed - June 15, 2015

What to write, what to write? I continue to journal, and what follows is my entry last Wednesday.

June 10, 2015: I have nothing interesting to say at all -- no anecdotes, no witty observations, nothing funny to report. I'm afraid! I'm afraid I may continue to feel like this. Anxiety creeps into my consciousness. How the hell am I going to make it through these years? And yet, what choice do I have? Time passes. Writer's block -- what's my motivation? Hopelessness? No! Sometimes my feelings seem non-existent. Am I depressed? My mind is filled with pointless ramblings and jumbled thoughts. I want to scream, but I won't. My actions are still governed by what I tell myself is appropriate behavior. Actually, screaming would probably do me good. If I scream though, they'll think I'm crazy -- and actually, I am sometimes. Uncomfortable, and no one cares. I know this self-talk is nonsense. I'm losing

it! I can't do this...I won't do this...I have no choice but to do this! But how? Tightness in my chest and boredom at the same time. Unmotivated and listless! Is this all? Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Put on a good face! Why me? I know why me? I earned all of this. Stop feeling sorry for myself, damn it! Frustration! What next? Arrrghhh!!! Help me please.....!

My struggle - I know that if I have a negative attitude, that my attitude will manifest and become pervasive in every area of my life. So for instance, if I think this place sucks, and I can't benefit at all from being here, then my experience will be a sucky one from which I derive no benefit. And when I live in the thoughts of "this place is pointless," "poor me," and "I hate my life here," then I create pain for myself. The more I dwell in the negative, the more negative and painful my experience will be.

So I do my best to maintain a positive attitude, but it's hard. I liken it to swimming. I have to keep exerting effort to stay above water. It seems the natural state around here is a lazy, nothing matters, apathetic, "everything is useless" way of being, and I don't want to be like that. But without constant effort on my part, it's easy for me to figuratively slip under water and drown. I don't want any of this to become my experience, but I worry it's inevitable. The fear of becoming institutionalized is a real one.

Greetings from Camp Fed - June 18, 2015:

I just reread my last Camp Fed installment. It's so dreary and serious. In reevaluating my struggle, I determine the actual source of my dreariness. On the outside, life happens. Life is a series of moments -- some serious, some silly, some important, some trivial, some filled with joy and some filled with sadness. But prison isn't life like that. It is mostly very serious here, or at least that's how it seems to me. So it's essential that I create a life for myself that is less serious and more like the life I had on the outside. I need to find a way to explore my silly side here. I need to be whimsical and laugh more. That is actually what's missing. Note to Self -- "it's not that serious!" None of this stuff is that serious, so maybe, I just need to cut myself a break. Actually, that's exactly what I need to do. These expectations I put on myself to find me, to find my motivation, to be productive, to be of service, to be the best, to say something funny, to use my extensive literary background and extend a metaphor throughout my writing, to write something meaningful..... "FUCKING ENOUGH ALREADY -- STOP IT SELF!"

OK now -- that's better. I'm laughing to myself, because I feel the best here when I'm running or walking and Katie Perry comes on the radio. I sing while I'm walking, and when I'm running, though when I'm running to impress, my singing is more like gasping. Yes, I'm that forty seven year old guy who knows the words to Katie Perry songs and actually sings them out loud. "Baby I'm a firework! Boom, boom, boom, brighter than the moon, moon, moon." Maybe my struggle to achieve balance represents the human condition, since I am, as it turns out, human. Maybe

here really is just a microcosm of society as a whole. Maybe my struggle is everyone's struggle. I have Plumber Man, and maybe somebody has "runs too fast around the track singing Katie Perry guy." Today, I'm going to believe that's the case.

After my bad day Wednesday, I was grateful to log into my email account to find seven emails from various friends. Your emails and letters help me so much. My spirits were lifted enormously. Which leads me to this -- one of the things for which I'm so grateful over the last year is reconnecting with so many people from so many periods in my life. My experience in addiction was a slowly narrowing personal field of vision, such that at the end of that period, I had virtually no life. I was living in a hotel room alone and miserable. But in the year that followed, prior to my current incarceration, I found out that I am not alone. Today, I believe that beyond a shadow of a doubt, and knowing that truth is what gets me through the bad days. Because my incarceration separates me from my friends, my self talk can slip really quickly back into a dark, negative place. When that happens, I have to catch myself -- I have to exert effort to stay above water, so I don't drown.

With that, I'm going to conclude this installment of Camp Fed. I'm truly grateful for your continued support -- until the next time! Peace and love.

Michael R

Post Script:

I still haven't disclosed my HIV status to Baby Mama guy, and I'm OK with that today. I see him every week at AA. It will happen when the time is right.

Chip's ex-wife recently decided it would be best if Chip doesn't speak with his son. His struggle continues. He has five more years to go here.

My barber John has his release date and will be going home soon after over twenty two years of incarceration for his first and only felony conviction.