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PRISON PICASSOS

"Passion motivates more than money."

Right now there's one thing that keeps me going in here more than anything else, and that's the unit's craft shop. I am fortunate to be there. Out of the 3000 or so inmates, only 48 are granted this privilege. The waiting list is long and it takes at least a year to rise to the top (most get scratched for disciplinary cases). Getting my name on that list was the very first thing that I did when I was transferred to this unit two years ago (on my last unit, Coffield, the craft shop, like the library, existed in name only). Craft shop hours are 11:30 to 5:30 Tuesday through Friday and 7:30 to 2:30 on Saturday, when it's open. Some inmates have jobs that prevent them from attending very often, but most of us spend every hour we can there "piddling" away, as they call it. It's definitely the best thing going in prison, and it makes all the difference in my life these days. Thank God.

There are five categories of craft shop "trades": leather work, wood work, metalwork, jewelry making, and "art", the catchall group of which there are only five of us. The other artists do some pretty impressive portrait work. I do quote contemporary art, painting on wood, canvas, and fabric. I've been an artist forever. I love mixing mediums and experimenting with different techniques to get unusual effects. For a while, I was doing pieces for all the various religious symbols of the world, and that's still going, but I'm taking a break from painting to make a large chess set out of clay. The board is finished and looks awesome, but the pieces are giving me trouble. Still, it gets quote "ooohs and aaah" s from everyone who walks by, which makes me feel good. I've always wanted to make my own chess set for some reason and was once carving one in the free world (the pieces kept disappearing over the years). The theme for this one is "East versus West", Christian monks versus Hindu yogis. Instead of Queens, the most powerful pieces are Christ and Krishna. And instead of Kings to capture, there's a cross and a caduceus (the medical staff with wings and twining snakes that initially represented the spine, it's energy channels, and enlightenment). Pretty cool, huh? We'll see how it goes. I'll paint the pieces when they're ready. Down the road, I'd like to geto into silk painting and make some large wall hangings.

I wouldn't be able to do any of this without the financial support for my mother. I'm so blessed and so thankful to have her out there for me. Everything I make goes to her to save or to as gifts. Most everyone in the craft shop sells what they make to support their craft. Prison staff seem to be the biggest customers. The guards get all the leather utility stuff – gun holsters, billy club holders, teargas canister holders, handcuff holders, etc. – Costs is at least half of what they pay outside the prison. The jewelry makers make nametags, rings, and things for the staff, and the metalworkers make fancy badges. The woodworkers do a lot of neat, small projects and mostly make clocks and plaques. The prices for everything usually just cover the cost for materials and enough to keep them in supplies. No one's getting rich, that's for sure. Anything not sold to unit staff gets picked up from visitors or sent home to be sold somehow, maybe on eBay.

But not all the prison artists are in the craft shop; they're talented artists all over the farm. However, the only art supplies allowed in cells are drawing boards, colored pencil, and worthless watercolors sold in the commissary along with the usual pens and pencils. Many inmates make greeting cards to sell. Those who put in the time and do good work come up with something new and different, like pop-up cards, can stay busy all the time. A basic card goes for \$.50 (two Ramen noodle soups). A special one can fetch up to a dollar (a bag of coffee). Another "hustle" for artists is portrait work done in pencil or pen. Some of these guys are amazing, taking a small photo and blowing it up into a perfect likeness of a loved one in any setting you want. A really good 8 x 10 portrait can go for \$10 or more.

There are some extremely talented people in prison. The best artists are Hispanic. They have their own distinctive style unique to that culture; it's hard to describe, but you definitely recognize it when you see it. Much of it is "barrio art", art reflecting life on the streets and Mexican gang culture. There are a lot of Aztec themes reflecting their heritage. And the women! They can draw some beautiful women. There are way fewer white artists around and fewer who are black. In a prison system that at least 70s percent, we only have two in the craft shop. It's more a matter of culture than economics, I believe. In 10 years, I've never seen a black inmate make greeting card or anything outside the craft shop. The Mexicans definitely have a monopoly.

However believe it or not, making and selling cards or other artwork to other inmates is illegal within the System. It's considered "trafficking and trading". True story. Officially, were not even permitted to give or loan each other soups or other commissary items the same reason. The Law know it's going on and generally look the other way, but it's just another example of the asinine rules we have to live with here. But creating artwork from your cell and selling it in the free world is not tolerated. Inmate artists who wish to support themselves this way are

out of luck and in big trouble if the administration finds out about it. Supposedly, it's possible to obtain special note permission to sell artwork from your cell, but I've never met anyone who's had success getting it. Oh, well.

"Give me a man who sings at his work." -- Thomas Carlyle

The ones who are in most demand on any unit are the tattoo artists. Someone who knows what he's doing is always busy and always has plenty of food in his locker. But it's not for the meek, because tattooing is illegal throughout the system. Plus it takes a bit of mechanical know how to put a tattoo gun together: the copper wire comes from cannibalized fan motors, the magnets from radio headphones, empty pen tubes are everywhere, screws and other bits of metal can be got from a buddy or a friend of a friend who works in maintenance, and good needles can come from a wire brush; but being able to create a working machine from it all takes some skill. You can hotwire a radio or attach an electrical cord to plug it in (preferred). Genuine India ink can be obtained from guards or made in the cell by burning baby oil with a wick underneath the bunk or toilet and collecting the black soot that builds up. Inferior homemade ink turns blue/gray and fades quickly over time, but if done right it works like the real thing. The best artists don't settle for anything but the best.

Priso and tattoos go hand-in-hand, it seems. Getting a jailhouse tattoo is a rite of passage of sorts. I have my share. Of course, you have to be careful not to get hepatitis or any other infectious disease. You have to make absolutely sure that the needles and ink are solely your own. The artist has to be reputable and of good character -- not an option sometimes, and that's where people get themselves in trouble. Staph infection is another common problem. So, all in all, getting a tattoo in jail or prison isn't such a great idea. But if you're extremely careful, it can be as safe as in the free world.

A lot of guys go in for gang related tats. Some are pretty extreme, especially when they're on the face. Plenty of inmates have teardrops at the corner of one eye, one for each time they've been locked up. There "full sleeves", designs covering the entire, "half sleeves" covering only the upper arm; "back pieces" usually one elaborate design covering the whole back; "chest plates" covering the chest, and of course, ones for everywhere else. "Nametags" are last names or street names in big fancy script over the back and shoulders or the stomach. Naked women tats are popular. Ditto for skulls and religious icons. As you'd expect, some artwork is pretty gaudy and some is spectacular.

Before I was incarcerated I had a dragon on the shoulder -- the first when I was 18 at the Sturgis bike rally; back when I rode a Harley look-alike. Each of the four tattoos I've gotten in here has special meaning for me. I drew them all myself. On one ankle is the Vedic "Om" symbol of

the universal vibration/sound of the Divine Source of All That Is. On the other ankle is a secret society symbol representing for me the quest for the Truth with a capital "T". On the back of my head, seen only when my head is shaved, is a tribal looking lotus blossom symbolizing spiritual awakening/enlightenment. Then, covering my chest, is an ancient Zoroastrian symbol of a circle/star with wings representing the soul's upward progress through good thoughts, words, and deeds. That's it. I'm done.

"A positive attitude will not solve all your problems, but it will annoy enough people to make it worth the effort."

Being able to do artwork in prison, especially in the craft shop, is wonderful. With so much time on our hands, it's a great way to keep busy. And it's important. Art therapy is proven effective in helping people and in rehabilitating inmates. I believe that being creative is our natural drive as spiritual beings and what we're all meant to do on Earth. It gives us purpose and meaning in life. It allows us to express ourselves. It's enjoyable, it's meditative, it's soothing and at the same time exciting. For me, creating artwork is essential. Being in the craft shop now helps make this prison experience bearable.

Unfortunately, some people don't want prisoners to be happy. They'd like to see things like the craft shop shut down. If they had their way, we'd all be chained to the walls and beaten with sticks. What they forget or fail to consider is that the vast majority of prisoners are released back into society. Would you rather have an angry, traumatized, depressed cretin on the streets or someone who's been changed, who became a better person, is happy and positive about life? Every little thing that you can do to help improve a person should be utilized in prison. The intellectual focus on incarceration should not be on punishment so much as rehabilitation. There's enough suffering in prison as it is. Allowing and encouraging prisoners to develop their latent talents and creativity – to write, to draw, to paint, to play musical instruments – helps them heal and grow and get their hearts and minds right. Everyone going into prison should come out new and improved and art can play a big part in that.

With the upcoming budget cuts here in Texas, were losing almost every education and reintegration program. Whether we also lose the craft shop remains to be seen.

Thanks as always for listening and caring. Please visit my website mysticministry.org and send me an e-mail. Bye for now.

– Eric