

### SURVIVAL

I recently turned 40 while serving the 22nd year of the life sentence I was given at 18 years old. I maintain a regular and rigorous exercise routine and am often complimented on the condition in which I keep myself. Upon receiving such compliments, my reply is nearly always the same : "I am trying to outlive this life sentence."

There was a time that such a thing seemed impossible. Coming into the Texas prison system as a teenager during the tumultuous and quite dangerous prison boom period of the mid-90s, facing 40 flat years before I would even be considered for parole, I felt like a shoeless and naked boy being placed at the foot of Mount Everest and told to climb it or die. An impossible task...and yet here I am, 22 years later and still climbing. While 18 years is still a daunting amount of time, I am seeing at least a glimmer of light at the end of this long, dark tunnel and realizing that there is a possibility that I could make parole someday. Maybe, just maybe, I truly CAN outlive this life sentence. I am surviving...

However, true survival in a place such as this means so much more than merely keeping one's self breathing. While walking out of here alive after an extensive length of time can certainly be counted a victory, surviving prison means holding onto one's sense of self-identity, individualism, and self-worth in an environment designed to literally strip a person of those things from the moment he or she steps off the bus. True survival means keeping one's spirit unbroken when it is under constant attack and learning the art of being humble without sacrificing one's pride and dignity. Truly surviving prison means overcoming the ever present danger of emotional, spiritual, and intellectual stagnation taking hold after spending years under intense oppression and seeking ways big and small to improve one's self.

Genuine survival in prison is not allowing one's entire self to be defined by what may very well be the one serious misdeed they have ever committed ; however foul it may have been, the mistake is often the exception rather than one's entire character. It is madness to allow such an exception to define oneself no matter how this system attempts to convince him or her that they are nothing more than the sum of their worst mistakes.

If a person walks out of these prisons alive, yet broken in spirit and with no sense of self-worth or personal identity, that person cannot be said to have truly survived prison.

I am not the same scared little boy who was thrown into this penitentiary. I am much more than he was ; and, because I know and respect who I am today



in spite of WHERE I am, I can honestly say that I am surviving prison.

I may just outlive this life sentence yet...

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