

LESSONS IN LIFE

By Patrick Middleton, [REDACTED]

"On Friendship"

One annoying cliché repeated so often by prisoners still green behind the ears is, "A man doesn't have any friends in prison. Only acquaintances." I used to argue passionately to convert these macho fellows: "How can you say that? I've got a few real good friends in here." To a man, I was told, "You're crazy if you trust anybody in here." I never changed a single mind. I came to pity them instead. I know that if they're here long enough, they'll learn the truth about another cliché--that no man is an island.

When I was a teen, my grandfather would often admonish me to choose my friends carefully. I never did though. I had one real friend and he chose me. I was a delinquent, he was an upstanding boy. Throughout all my skullduggeries, my friend was there for me--never embarrassed, never judging, never giving up on me. Forty-five years later, he's an engineer, I'm a lifer. But we're still friends. There's a lesson here.

Prison has taught me some precious lessons about life. I've learned, for example, that there are two distinct worlds in which we human beings live--the internal world and the external world. Each has its boundaries of freedom. My external world consists of the walkways and hallways, the prison yard, the chapel, dining hall, education building, gymnasium, and this little room of a cell. There is much more freedom, though, in my inner world. The walkways can lead to just about anywhere, and I am free to believe. I am free to believe in a God or none at all. I can choose algebra or

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geometry. I can see the glass as half empty or half full. And if I wish,
I can cultivate love and goodwill in the hearts and minds of others and my
own.

And then there are lessons about friendship. How life is so much better
when we have a few good friends to share it with. It takes time--sometimes,
years--to cultivate lasting friendships. It starts with trust. We take
chances, we show our vulnerabilities, and it's a beautiful thing when it's
reciprocated. Along the way, we learn to listen and encourage, we share our
histories, our hills and valleys, we laugh and tease and sometimes cry
together, and much more.

Many of the friends I've gained over the years are fellow musicians.
We worked hard together. We argued, we fussed, we created lots of good music
and many special memories. We grew as musicians and as human beings. We came
to depend on each other for a smile or an ear when we needed it. There was
a spiritual comfort in knowing that they had my back and I had theirs.

What do you do after you've shared years of your life with a friend
who is suddenly transferred or goes home or dies? How do we deal with that
"missing you" feeling, that same homesick feeling we felt when we first came
to prison?

We stay strong, that's what we do. We wait for time to lessen the pain.
We work on other friendships. And from time to time we rearrange the pictures
of our friends in our photo albums; we relive the memories of them in our
minds. And if that's not enough, we talk to our old friends when we're alone.

We tell them how much we miss them.

And then we remember that in having known them, life has been good to us.

"On Gratitude"

We've all heard it before. A brother greets another brother: "How're you doing, man?" And the brother responds, "Oh, you know, man. It's the same old, same old. Just another funky day."

Yesterday started out to be just another day. I went to breakfast and saw the same noisy ducks I'd seen flying all over the joint the day before and the day before that. Those same handsome cell dogs were in the yard for their morning walk, and the same humongous groundhog I had watched yesterday was peeking out of its tunnel in the yard below my window.

After breakfast I was called to the dispensary to have the callus on my foot attended to. I signed in and then sat on the bench to wait. Sitting beside me was a man who looked to be about my age. His left foot was heavily wrapped with gauze and there was a wet wine-red stain at the end of his foot. "How're you doing, man?" I asked, as nonchalantly as I could. The man was obviously in pain. He kept his gaze on his foot and replied, "Not too good. They just cut off my toes. Diabetes." I paused and tried to look at him with understanding. "That's too bad," I said. "Diabetes runs in my family too. It scares the heck out of me. I've been lucky so far." We spent the next

ten minutes sharing stories of family members who have diabetes.

When the nurse called out my name I said, "See you around," and followed the nurse into a room where another prisoner was sitting in a wheelchair grasping his chest and struggling with each breath. "Nurse! I'm having a heart attack! Please help me!" The nurse said, "The doctor's on his way. Just hang in there." The same nurse told me to take a seat and remove my shoe and sock. I watched as she took the prisoner's blood pressure. A minute later the doctor bounced into the room and asked me where the pain was. I said, "It doesn't hurt unless I step on something sharp." The nurse said, "This one, doctor."

Suddenly, I no longer wanted my callus treated. All I wanted to do was to get up and walk out of that room and find those ducks and that groundhog and those four handsome dogs and just gaze at them, man, and really see them. And the next fellow who told me how miserable the day was, I would remind him that he has toes to feel and a heart that pumps and eyes to see and if that's not enough to be thankful for, then what is?

"On Free Will and Determinism"

Some of my brothers will tell you that you have been stripped of your free will when you entered the front gates of this prison. Some of my brothers will tell you that these walls will tell you when to eat and when

to sleep, when to get up and when to get down, what to wear and how to wear it. Because this is so, they will say, you have lost your freedom to choose.

I want to tell you that they are wrong, for no one can tell you what to think and what to say. These decisions are yours alone to make. And there are more.

You have the choice to take responsibility for your circumstances and make today the beginning of the rest of your life. Anytime you choose you can look in the mirror and decide if you like what you see. You can write letters to those you have hurt--your family and friends--and begin healing and making amends. You can hang out with your homeboys or go to school and get an education. You can walk in the library and read any book on the shelf. You can attend AA or NA and get help from your peers and help them in return.

Though you've lost your public life, there's much to gain in here--peace, hope, self-forgiveness--a private freedom. Redeem yourself, brothers! That's the word for it. Redemption.

"On Reading"

Who dunnit? And other mysteries:

Did the cat that fell out of the third floor window bounce when it hit the sidewalk?

How do you get to Carnegie Hall?

Who threw the empty ketchup bottle with the secret recipe inside it
in the bottom of Lake Whatchacallit?

Is sweet William a flower or a young boy?

How can you be both the watcher and the watched?

How did crickets evolve?

Is inertia relative to gravity? Is gravity relative?

Where was the sign, "Free Knowledge--Bring Your Own Container," found?

Did Oliver get Penelope in the end?

Who said, "It was good to be alive and a part of the world where hope
shined a bright promise, if you could just see it"?

How do you get to China and back without ever leaving your cell?

And what was the blind man's name who stood on the busy corner tapping
his red and silver cane to the beat of the traffic?

Is God really watching you?

The answers to these questions are between the pages of the
book and the cracks of your mind.