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Drawing I
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THE THERAPEUTIC NATURE OF ART IN PRISON

My oldest memories of drawing start in grade school. I would mostly draw things I could not have or afford: the latest Jordan sneakers, a nice house, a new limousine. Mostly, the types of things an inner-city kid would see in advertisements, but never actually own. In this sense, drawing helped me cope with my inability to keep up with the Joneses; however, later in life, I would learn that drawing can serve a lot of functions. In prison, drawing helps me escape my current circumstances, release built-up tension, and give back to society.

At twenty-nine years of age, after having served eleven years of a twenty-two year-to-life sentence for second degree murder and robbery, I find the mundane aspects of prison life almost psychologically unbearable. I am like a horse with blinders on, trained to stop at yellow lines and respond to the sounds of buzzers and bells. Although the location of the prison complex may change, the many rules, small cells, and blue-for-officers and green-for-prisoners uniforms remain the same. I can look out of the window, past the bars, over the wall and in the far distance see the clear blue sky merging with tree tops starting to brown as the seasons change. I cannot touch them. I cannot smell them. I am trapped in my cell. For me there is no vacation or possible release until 2020 – or at least that is what I thought.

One day I sat down to draw a picture of a car coming out of a tunnel after a snowstorm. I started by blacking out an entire sheet of 18" X 22" drawing paper with a stick of compressed charcoal. Once the sheet was covered, I spread the charcoal out evenly by smudging it with my hands in a circular motion. I blew the excess onto the floor and started drawing. Because the sheet was coated with dark charcoal, I employed a drawing technique where one erases to draw the desired image. The method is called subtraction. I roughly sketched in the trees, the street, and the tunnel before I realized the prison's bell had rung. Buzz! Buzz! Buzz! It was time for chow. I had been drawing for over four hours, and I was nowhere near finished.

I went to chow because I had to eat, but I did not want to leave the drawing. Something was happening. I was not stressed or pressured to get the piece done on time as if I was under a contract. Nevertheless, I felt the need to keep on drawing. It felt as if the eraser had come alive and was calling me back into the land of the drawing. This was similar to the power of attraction that the magic ring had over Frodo in The Lord of the Rings. I was there inside the drawing; I could smell the exhaust from the car. The pine trees were freshly covered with snow weighing down their many branches. The scene was breathtaking.

The drawing became personal not because I made it but because I was transported into its world. I was at peace in a wintery landscape for the hours I spent drawing. No bars, no counts, and no officers. I was in the zone; all that existed was me and the drawing. This was my vacation. I can now go anywhere, by giving myself completely to a drawing and becoming one with the piece. Through my art I have met John Coltrane, conducted an orchestra, and been to Africa. However, the only drawback is that eventually I have to

return to the reality of my prison cell. One may ask, is such a temporary escape beneficial?

Some may say no, likening the escape to an addict's temporary escape while high. They would argue that when the trip is over one is still faced with the same problems that existed before the high. Although this may be true of both drawing and drugs, an added benefit of drawing is that it is therapeutic. More specifically, it leaves the artist feeling better instead of having harmful effects on the body like most illegal drugs. Some opponents of art programs in prison fail to realize that art can be used therapeutically to aid prisoners' rehabilitation.

For instance, because art is a form of expression, prisoners who have anger management problems can use it as a vehicle to channel their anger. Instead of lashing out, prisoners can always pick up a pencil and draw! The time it takes to complete a drawing allows for the release of built-up tension. In the end, the prisoner will be in a better state of mind and have a work of art as an added benefit.

In prison, it is easy to find men facing an array of different problems. Some struggle with the courts in a legal battle, some struggle to keep family ties strong, and some struggle to remain sane in an unnatural environment. Therefore, stress, depression, loneliness, bitterness, anger, remorse, and anxiety are all commonplace in New York State Prisons. Art can be used to address some of those issues. By having prisoners draw scenes and images expressing those feelings they wish to confront and conquer, they will begin to effectively manage their problems.

Over the years I have experienced the multitude of those emotions; however, drawing has been like a medicine as it changes my mood and uplifts my spirits. For example, if I

start a drawing feeling lonely and depressed, I find company with myself as an artist and with the drawing as it develops. A completed drawing leaves me in good spirits because I have just created something beautiful that people will enjoy.

As an artist, I ask questions concerning the drawing and what I see. These questions turn into a full scale conversation; sometimes out loud and other times in my head. The questions can be challenging: Is this angle correct, is that the right perspective? How can I make the piece more realistic, or capture the mood I want to convey? By actively answering these questions I stimulate my mind and creative ability. Therefore, I have erased my loneliness. The answers to those questions also serve to intrigue art appreciators and evaluators alike. They are not the only ones, for I too am pleased with the outcome. The outcome is a work of art leaves me depression-free.

Drawing allows me to give back to society. Whether I am drawing a poster, a custom greeting card, a design on a plaque, or jewelry box, I am ultimately sharing my work with someone. A family member, a friend, or a prisoner's wife or girlfriend will find happiness and appreciate my creative ability. I am happy that in my current circumstances I can use a gift that God has given me to touch the lives of others. After having caused my community much heartache and pain, I am pleased to finally be able to give back by sharing my artwork with others.

In short, drawing is a win-win for all involved. The artist builds upon his or her skills and shares them with the world; the viewer or recipient is allowed to admire and be inspired by the artist's creativity. Because drawing has helped me cope with prison life for the last eleven years, I recommend drawing to the world as a way to find a sense of peace in trying times.