

Inside The Box

A Prisoner Tells His Tale

By Matthew Hattley

The Importance of Communication



Matthew Hattley

For prisoners who want to stay in touch with the outside world, there are three ways of doing so: 1) correspondence, 2) telephone calls and 3) visits.

Under certain circumstances, for disciplinary reasons, these privileges may be revoked or suspended for an extended period of time, depending on severity of the offense. Other problems include "blocks" being put on a phone line by, say, a relative — to prevent our calls to them from being processed, as well as the hassle of travelling anywhere from 60 to 300 miles to visit a prisoner, which is expensive, even by car, and time consuming.

So once you think about all this you can see that writing a letter takes on a whole new meaning. For many of us, this is our primary means of expressing our deepest thoughts and feelings to those in society. It's the only way we can remain in the loop with family and friends. For many of us, this is also the primary means of expressing our deepest thoughts and feelings to those out there. And fortunately, a postage stamp only costs 46¢.

Letters show us that not only is someone thinking about us, but that they care enough to make the time to write a

few lines. Hearing from family and friends provide us with a sense of connection, something to help us maintain our sanity in here. Plus — and it's an important plus — the more frequently a prisoner communicates with the outside world the easier it will be for him to make a positive transformation back into society upon his eventual release.

Now, depending on where you live, a letter will usually reach you within three days or so. Under normal circumstances a person can write and receive a reply within a week. In here, we can only send and receive mail Monday to Friday; there is no weekend delivery for us.

Unfortunately, we're on the wrong side of the great change in technology. Today's mania for social networking, from texting to Tumblr, means people are accustomed to receiving instant replies. They no longer have the patience to write an actual letter and then wait days for a reply. But what society views as obsolete and inconvenient, we view as a necessity. Of course, a visit is great, and it's always wonderful to physically see and speak to someone, but a letter we can re-read whenever we have the time and need to do so. We really draw hope and strength from that, and it helps us continue moving forward.

So... if you have a family member or friend who is incarcerated, take a few minutes and show them some love by writing a brief letter. Expect to receive a 3 to 5 page reply. We have a lot to say and share!

To avoid (painful) misunderstandings, please respond promptly to all of our letters. Silence speaks volumes. If you can't for some reason, please explain why at a later date; don't leave room for speculation, doubt and worry. Honesty is the best policy. If you don't feel like writing, just a basic greeting card would suffice. Anything beats a blank. Out there in society, you are surrounded by family and friends. Everyone is a text away, a simple drive away to meet. In here, we are alone. And regardless of what some may believe, incarceration does not render us inhuman. Many of us simply made some bad decisions in the past.

Furthermore, photographs are also really important. They don't have to be of you, or even of a person. There's an entire world out there that we haven't seen with our own eyes in decades. The neighborhoods we come from have changed, the change of seasons sets a tone and brings back fond memories for us. In essence, you can become our eyes by sharing those beautiful sights with us.

Of course, if you haven't seen your loved one in more than four months, a surprise visit is in order. Even if it's only for an hour or two. Show them that you miss them and you love them.

If nothing else, prison has taught me this: the small things usually mean the most.

M. Hattley, #93A9739
 Eastern Correctional Facility
 Box 338
 Napanoch, NY 12458-0338