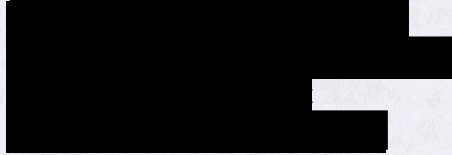


Essay Submission for:

Voices Through the Wall: Prisoners Write About Prisons

Submitted by:



I would like to first express my gratitude to everyone who has made it possible for we as prisoners to have this unique opportunity. There are many men in prison who are smarter than I and have had much more diverse and profound experiences in prison than I have. I am still fairly new to prison. Mine is of course only one man's perspective about a complex system that I still seek to understand.

I am 47 years old. I have five sons and four daughters with my wife of 22 years – eight of which still live at home. I have served approximately four years of an eleven-year prison sentence. I am deeply remorseful for my crimes and how they have harmed and cost others.

By any account, I was a man greatly blessed – a faithful wife, nine healthy beautiful children, a good government job, our own home, and land we were developing. Yet, despite all that good in my life, I became frustrated and eventually destructive to my family and myself. As I reflect upon how I went so wrong, I believe that the root of the problem was ungratefulness, impatience and just plain selfishness. And isn't it true that we often fail to appreciate what we have until we've lost it?

Looking back at my experiences in coming to prison, I surmise that every challenge encountered was selected for me from a repository of the standard trials and tribulations common to humanity. None of these difficulties, in and of themselves, are fundamentally different from what any other person might suffer anywhere else in the world at any other time. Individually, each of these are generic to life, *but* the particular set that is characteristic to the criminal proceeding/incarcerated experience has been the most traumatic ordeal I have ever had to endure. I have persevered through some pretty grueling military training, but all of it combined pales in comparison to how this experience has wrenched on my soul. And frankly, it is painful every time I have to think about it or recount it.

Hands down, the hardest part of prison for me has been the separation from my wife and children. Upon conviction, I lost sixteen years toward a military retirement, a 60K/year federal civil service job, my good reputation, trust in the community, and of course my freedom. All those can be replaced. But how do you replace the lost relationship with your loved ones? How can you ever replace the missed experiences of recitals, ballgames, camping trips or just watching your children grow up? How do they replace the absence of their father and everything that is given, related and modeled best by their own dad? Daily I am vexed by our separation. Some days are worse than others.

Prison is a very lonely place. The prisoner is cut off and isolated in a cold and strange environment. Even if he has someone to call, the calls are collect and relatively expensive. Many men have no one to call or write. It has been my experience, and I have heard it countless times from the men, that family and friends are often slow in responding to letters if at all. Many men have been abandoned by their own families. No

matter how you slice it, that hurts. Even accounting for the busyness of life on the streets, and the discipline involved in exercising the archaic skill of corresponding through postal mail, we are still left doubting our worth in your eyes. "Can't they make a little time to write me?" "Don't they realize that I'm locked-up, cut off and really lonely?" "Do I really mean so little to them?" I have heard many times myself, "Oh, I think about you all the time...and I pray for you." Well, if the prayers are actually going up, then we are thankful for that. But I am here to tell you from first hand experience, having someone in your thoughts does nothing to comfort them. And, at the risk of sounding harsh, all the many good reasons why you didn't write or visit really don't matter, because we know you could have, but you chose not to. Instead, you chose to do something else. That's the truth, and it hurts.

Whether they are locked up, locked out, shut in, shut out or admitted, you've got to call, write or visit. That will show them you care. That will assure them of what everyone fundamentally needs – to feel and to know that we are valued and loved. Never underestimate the life giving impact your call, letter or visit can have on the lonely heart. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive.

Being convicted translated to a loss of trust. I was used to being trusted. First of all, I was given nine children. What greater trust is there than to be given responsibility for another life? I was a senior non-commissioned officer in the Air Force. I had a top-secret security clearance. I was responsible for hundreds of thousands of dollars of other people's money, to mention a few. But none of that mattered anymore, as if it never was.

I was a convicted felon, one who had betrayed trust, and as such, was no longer deserving of trust. And that was a very difficult reality to face.

I found myself in one particular unit where the cynicism of staff ran pretty deep. One day, after being treated for months with contempt and what I believe to be an unwarranted level of distrust and harshness, I asked two members of the unit leadership a pointed question. "Is it really necessary to assume that all inmates are devious manipulators until proven otherwise?" Without hesitation, and in unison, both men resounded with an emphatic "yes". After further interchange, I learned that their perspective and approach had to do with their own survival. Much of the prison population is indeed devious and manipulative. The staff is trained to be vigilant and to guard against being taken advantage of. Unfortunately, in this environment, we are often dealt with as a whole, and you are guilty until proven innocent. That was tough getting used to – starting relationships in the negative. Fortunately, by some effort on my part, and the grace of God, I have managed to reacquire a degree of trust with both inmates and staff. This trust regained is more precious and more closely guarded than ever before. Once again, we often fail to comprehend the value of something until we've lost it.

Another thing many of us lose when we get locked up is a general sense of safety and well-being. I am 6-2 and over 200 lbs, so I haven't experienced the daily fear that some men have. Even so, I have been in situations that had me fearful of being attacked and harmed. I have been spared from any physical attacks in prison - probably mostly due to the prayers of my family and friends. But everyone knows that not all men are as

fortunate. I have to say though; the institution where I currently reside has made the physical safety of inmates a high priority. I do not have a particularly lengthy list of praises for prison administrators, but violence here is dealt with swiftly and decisively - and rightly so. No ones sentence called for being placed in a situation to be attacked or violated by another inmate. There is enough loss and pain in the incarcerated experience without having to live in fear for your personal safety.

Privacy was lost. There is essentially no privacy in prison. It is mostly for safety and security reasons, understandably, but a significant loss nonetheless. Everyone appreciates a little privacy when it comes time to "sit down" or shower. And a little is all that's afforded in prison. To paint the picture for you, imagine toilet and shower stalls only chest high and open again just below your knee. Now, pictures yourself having to use those stalls in the middle of your local shopping mall. Yeah, that's pretty much what it's like. Incidentally, I've wondered during these years of living under the surveillance camera, audio monitoring, pat searches, strip searches, cell searches, digital scanning of my mail, and the monitoring and recording of 100% of my phone conversations, if I am not living, now, a harbinger of what's coming soon to unincarcerated Americans everywhere. I would have said "free" Americans, but in light of the substantial and rapid erosion of our individual liberties, particularly as we fearfully exchange *real* freedoms for *perceived* security, I would be misrepresenting the truth and offending our forefather's notion of, and sacrifice for, personal liberties.

Prison has certainly been an intense exercise in learning how to cope. Webster's College Dictionary 2nd Edition (2005) defines "cope" as, "to deal successfully with a difficult problem or situation." And that's exactly what I failed to do on the streets. My inability to effectively respond to the problems and difficulties in my life, combined with my selfishness, recklessness and disrespect, resulted in criminal behavior and the destruction of my life, as I knew it. Most, if not all, of the men I have spoken with, since incarcerated, have confessed the same.

We ran from our pain. We ran to alcohol, drugs, sex, or whatever else would take away the pain of our trials, our fear, and our feelings of inadequacy. We ran to the ever-elusive sanctuary of comfort and pleasure. Eventually, that place became more important to us than even our own families. We did not possess the strength of character that our families and our culture so desperately need. We didn't understand that the pain is not a bad thing, but that trials and tribulations are the very instruments that forge our character, if we respond to them correctly. But that understanding comes with training and modeling. And therein lies a great social deficiency – the effective fathering and training of young men into strong, responsible, courageous, principle-centered leaders. The more I think about it, this very issue may be at the heart of what is needed to help inmates return to society as healthy, productive, contributing members of our culture.

My personal pursuit of this man of character has helped me immensely to heal, grow and effectively cope with the stresses of prison. A large part of that effort has been in learning how to respond constructively to adversity. I have needed to remember the invaluable and guiding truth that *my success in life is determined less by what happens to me and more by how I respond to it*. Men in prison desperately need to learn this truth

and to develop coping mechanisms – constructive outlets to respond appropriately to the inevitable stresses of life.

In addition to the loss of my familial relationships, my freedom, privacy and trust, I have had to respond to the strain of close quarters, persistent noise, humiliation, powerlessness, disrespect and the malicious and damaging actions of some prison staff. Intent on learning to respond constructively and becoming the man everyone needs me to be, I have developed and regularly employ several mechanisms to aid in my healing and strengthening. These practices are the core of my sanity and self-improvement in this environment. *Physical training* is a very effective stress reliever and leaves me with a sense of physical, mental and emotional well-being. *Journaling* also provides release and facilitates the articulation of my thoughts and valuable self-discovery. *Self-Improvement study* is stimulating, gives me focus, provides goals, offers solutions and brings understanding. *Prayer and the Scriptures* allow me to counsel with God, give me comfort, help, strength, empowerment, wisdom, compassion, the most candid and honest communication, and combat loneliness. My *friendships* allow me to give to and receive from others, provide support, encouragement, perspective, empathy, companionship and accountability. Learning to play *the guitar* has given me a sense of achievement, has been very therapeutic, and is an excellent means of self-expression.

My use of the term “men”, up to this point, has been done so loosely. There are approximately 1500 inmates at this institution, and the vast majority of them are not “men” at all. They are boys in adult male bodies. [Actually, some of them are females in male bodies, but we won’t get into that right now]. Real men have strength of character. Authentic men face their fears, their problems and their responsibilities courageously and

selflessly. Mature men don't run and hide from difficulty. Men of character are moral and find legitimate means to meet their valid needs. Males in prison, for that matter, the majority of males in American culture, need to grow up and be mature men.

I contend that our prison system, and its excessive size, is just one of many social symptoms resulting from the lack of effective manhood in our culture. Along with the disintegration of the family; political, government and private sector corruption at all levels; a widespread reliance on government welfare; the abuse and exploitation of women and children; and mass media's relentless and ubiquitous glorification of social decadence, our obese prison system is a direct, yet more long term, consequence of the lack of responsible and courageous men fulfilling their critical roles in every arena of our society.

One might argue that I am oversimplifying a far more complex problem, and that concentrating our efforts on developing men of character could not possibly cure the majority of our social ills. Really? Then answer me this. Would a principle-driven man that embodies morality, honesty, integrity, fairness, a sense of duty, courage, respect, patience, loyalty, self-control, kindness and mercy exploit sexual favors from his intern and then lie about it to the entire nation? Would he try to sell a vacant seat in the U.S. Senate, or misappropriate millions upon millions of dollars of investors hard earned retirement funds? Would he use government bailout money, at taxpayer's expense, to finance a tropical vacation for top executives, or, with no regard for decency, continue to produce, broadcast and profit greatly from the display of absolutely every form of profanity and violation of humanity that society can possibly stomach? Would he abandon his place as husband and father, leaving his wife and children to fend for

themselves while he pursues a life that better suits his desires, or be too lazy, impatient and careless to get an education and/or a job, but instead sell drugs and steal from other people? Collectively, we have witnessed and paid for each of these – from men without character. Some argue that prisons need more academic and job skills training - maybe so. They have their place. But I had a college degree when I came to prison, and most of the aforementioned were highly educated. Academic education is not enough.

If you agree that men of character would not have perpetrated or tolerated these selfish and devastating acts, then it should follow that men of character is what we need - what wives and children need; what employers need; what our government needs – men responsible and courageous enough to do the right thing at the right time – wise and noble men. *This* should be the primary focus of our prison system – returning to society men of character.

Granted, the how presents a formidable challenge, but I believe that efforts need to begin in the area of creating desire in males to aspire to mature manhood. Is there a motivation more powerful and effective than desire? But desire needs to be created for the type of man that our culture needs – not the model that is currently being portrayed through persistent imagery that depicts a man as someone who is covered in “bling”, is surrounded by “b--ches”, has a “pimpin’ ride”, and can’t seem to keep his pants pulled up around his waist.

Maybe we should look to the advertising industry for how to stimulate that desire. After all, they have developed into an art the ability to get people to discard perfectly good and paid for personal property for a newer item they neither need nor can afford. And in the process, violate their better judgment by agreeing to financial servitude to

have the thing they didn't even know existed two months earlier. Advertisers motivate people to pursue what they don't need, to their harm. Can we use their tactics to motivate men to pursue what we all so desperately need? The virtuous qualities of a principle-driven man need to be promulgated, praised, modeled, and systematically inculcated in community. Repetition is the mother of learning.

Some of my fellow inmates that were previously involved with the Job Corps think that our prisons would be more rehabilitative if they took a closer look at the Corps' strategies to teach basic life skills and personal management.

We may already be on the right track. A "Therapeutic Community" model for "living right" is currently being implemented institution-wide where I am currently held. I have been actively involved for the past five months and currently hold a paid inmate leadership position. It's still early, and implementation has not been without its hiccups and ball-dropping, but I see great potential to transform this prison, and maybe many others, from junk yards to repair shops. I am particularly impressed with the leadership and staff in my current living unit and astonished at the disparity in culture and spirit from my other experiences at this same facility. The German writer Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe said, "Treat a man as he appears to be and you make him worse. But treat a man as if he were what he potentially could be, and you make him what he should be." Authority in this unit, from the top down, has come closer to this philosophy than any other that I have experienced while under the control of the Department of Corrections (DOC). And maybe that is why this unit leads the rest of the institution in successful implementation of, and contributions to, this new therapeutic model. Leadership here is setting the standard as they model open-mindedness, humility, respect, grace, civility,

helpfulness, trust, praise, esteem, appreciation, fairness and flexibility. There is a vast resource for individual and institutional reform within the inmate population. It will be the wise leaders who recognize, value and successfully utilize that great supply.

My perception, up to this point, is that prison has been far more about warehousing than real "correction", and to a substantial degree economically motivated. To be entirely candid, I have concerns. I struggle with my own cynicism. I know how to lie, cheat and steal as well as anyone. Will this model be implemented effectively and honorably according to the spirit and goal of its inception, which I understand to be the reduction of recidivism and prison population? "Corrections" is big business. When has getting smaller ever been a goal of business? The DOC is the largest employer in this state. It has ballooned, in recent years, monopolizing upon the fact that Americans are willing to incarcerate more and more of their neighbors and for longer terms than ever before in our history. Will the call for prison reform, and the public oversight of it, be strong enough to resist the economic incentives and forces that keep the system expanding? Let's not kid ourselves. "Corrections" is big business, and with unprecedented autonomy. Even the courts have stated repeatedly that they are reluctant to interfere with the operation of prisons.

In order to effect fundamental change in "Corrections" the American people, as a whole, will need to take responsibility for the problem and have the foresight to commit to the development of an effective human resource reclamation program that is not the typical quick fix proposition, but one that is aimed at lasting individual change and long term social benefit. May God help us to do what is right.

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