

From Thief to Belief:
Life in the Monastery of the Prodigal Son
by Mikhail Markhasev

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The outside world is fascinated with the inside arena of prison life, where the realm of the riveting struggle for survival is often displayed in a most raw manner. But for most of us on the inside, the upside down universe of prison living is a twisted caricature of life: a shameful existence, stained with past sins and marred by excruciating pain of other people's suffering. Glorifying in prison lore is similar to boasting about jumping into a sewage pipe and then sporting the stench like a badge of honor. The curious world seeks to sniff and examine the human sewer. For some reason people are infatuated with evil: true crime specials rule the airwaves, our culture is obsessed with mobsters and cartels, and criminals are often portrayed as heroic vigilantes. But in here I am thinking about my victims, and those of us who have shed the suffocating skin of criminality are trying to crawl back to a semblance of normalcy, to a time when our hearts of stone were still flesh and blood.

While the curious seek to uncover the root of evil, digging through this drainpipe of human folly and misery, I am scraping away the deeds of my past, hoping to resurrect the tender shoots of goodness which can be unearthed and cultivated. It is not a simple process, but as a repentant prisoner, I must receive my prison sentence as necessary bitter medicine in order for my soul to be healed of its ills.

Cutting through the winter fog of an unmarked road, I rolled in on a chrome clunker into the state prison at Corcoran. As two guards escorted me in handcuffs toward the gray pile of drab concrete isolation units -- my home for

most of my twenties -- I did not suspect that the hole was going to become the womb of my transformation. Yes, every time I left my cell I would be handcuffed and led from one door to another, but the inner transfiguration would entail a liberating journey within myself, unlocking doors I never knew existed, though they were mine all along.

Perspectives for my future were bleak and discouraging: serving life without parole meant that like Jonah in the belly of a whale, my life was swallowed whole and entire by the deeds of my past. There was no future to speak of, only a lifelong repetition of the present drudgery of a prison routine, until life ebbed out of my institutionalized body. This was the straight-jacket of my own making, and each decision I made in the free world was but another stitch in my tragic predicament, steeped in blood and tears of others.

Although the way forward was blocked and I had little wiggle room, the path within and backwards, into the past, became the direction on my road of repentance and self-discovery. God had to rattle my seared conscience and awaken my soul from the slumber of spiritual death, but I was responsible for taking the necessary steps in the right direction. Along this path, the old criminal in me had to die, be stripped of his arrogance, his masks had to be smashed, and his false identity was going to starve through a diet of self-denial and surrender. Gradually, the new man -- made in the image of His Maker and seeking the likeness of Christ -- would emerge, refashioned through unexpected blessings and humbling afflictions.

Reading and applying the Holy Scriptures, prayer and meditating on historical Christian literature, allowed the light of Divine presence to reveal the profound fallenness of my soul and the sinfulness of my entire existence. The yearning for spiritual healing and deliverance from the sin which so easily entangled me stoked the fire of zeal to change, to be reborn within and

without, uniting myself to God through every thought, feeling, and action toward my cellmates, neighbors, guards, family, or friends through correspondence. Contact in the hole was very limited in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Once group exercise yards were replaced by cages (two rows of "dog cages," about 12'X12'), then one's cellmate -- if one was allowed a cellmate -- was the only person with whom to share a handshake.

Because I did not know who I was or what I was living for, study of history, of other people's lives and experiences, allowed me to use the lives of others as template for my own, gradually pulling me out of my self-absorbed worldview. Contrary to my previous belief, I was not at the center of the universe, which was filled with righteous and heroic persons, who struggled and suffered, who overcame great challenges and persevered in adversity. Many of these exemplary people were unrecognized: they lived and died quietly, doing what is right, bestowing life to others through virtue and sacrifice. Their examples not only encouraged me to become more than what I was, but also condemned my former vice, vileness, and selfish pettiness. The degree of my shameless self-love stood in stark contrast with their selfless service. As I read the lives of the Saints and martyrs, among other heroes of faith, I realized that far from being mere personas of distant histories, there were similarly heroic persons in my family and others who had influenced my life for the better. In my blindness I failed to notice them in the true light and took for granted their efforts. The vivid crystallizations of the past pointed me to the living icons of the present, from whom I could learn and whose example I should emulate.

The beckoning of Christ's high calling in the Gospel compelled me to cultivate my soul in an arid wilderness where the effort to seek the spirit's nourishment had to come from within. Much has been written about the detrimental

effects of long-term solitary isolation, of the destructive ripples of confinement in the SHU. But that is only half of the story. I am grateful for the years I spent in the hole because these years were spent in wrestling with my inner rage and impulsive anger. Just as a contagious person needs to be quarantined in order not to infect others, even so isolation kept me in check and allowed me to be stripped of my pretenses. I could have easily ignored the crucial lessons the hole taught me, but I received the reality of the SHU as a valuable school in which I had to figure out who I was going to be for the rest of my life: the immature, irresponsible criminal who entered the SHU, or the Christian man who left it almost a decade later.

Inner growth through spiritual contemplation, personal introspection, and vicarious participation in wholesome books were important cornerstones of my change. The past was vividly resurrected in my cell, saturating my soul with a sense of belonging to a timeless human community which passed me the baton of hope, of faith, of love, in order to run the race of life in a man worthy of God and of my ancestors, many of whom sacrificed and suffered just to afford me the opportunity to live and attain that which is eternal. The same was true of my loved ones in the present and of my friends in the Church, who did not treat me like a model inmate, but like a beloved member of their family. The life in Christ, not prison, became my ultimate reality, through which prison became not a means of punishment, but a sacrament through which I participated in the Kingdom of God.