

Incarcerated Tears: Experiencing Pain & Loss in Prison

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"Alex died". It was a cold Tuesday morning in the Yard when Scotty broke the news about our mutual friend. The December air suddenly felt honest as I rediscovered my breath while reflexively hardening my heart against the pain to come. "He left us on November 24th [2018], but I just found out about it last night" Scotty explained. "I thought we had more time" I replied in stunned denial. "I just sent him a letter yesterday!"

Prison is all about loss, on both sides of the wall, so I should be an expert on grieving by now. The truth is that I'm terrible at resolving losses despite a lifetime of practice. Instead of addressing my pain, I build emotional walls to imprison the sadness I don't want to feel. At least in Alex's case I could see it coming even if I didn't want to acknowledge the dark reality of his abrupt stage 4 cancer diagnosis. "The hospitals said that they can't do anything for me" Alex warned in what was to be his last letter nine days before passing away. Still, I couldn't accept it.

"Stay in touch and I'll see you on the other side" Alex said while shaking my hand and wishing me well the last time I saw him. The day was October 2, 2017 and I was being involuntarily transferred from MCI-Norfolk to the Massachusetts Treatment Center (MTC). Alex, and another friend James, walked with me from the property department to booking before we had to part ways. My shackles clanked in rhythm to the motion of the transport van as the gray walls of Norfolk diminished. I knew then that I was going

to miss my friends, but the permanence of our parting never crossed my mind.

Just ten days before my transfer Alex and I shared the stage as Norfolk Prison Debating Society teammates in a big event against M.I.T. We were arguing in favor of pharmaceutical companies being held criminally responsible for their role in the opioid crisis. On rebuttal, Alex brilliantly illuminated how "When a gun kills someone the gun did exactly what you expected it to do, but when pain-relieving medicine hurts you something is wrong". Certainly, there was nothing wrong with his mental or physical agility at this point as his own pain had yet to surface.

It seems surreal now to think that Alex and I had set-up obituary displays around the Norfolk auditorium to honor those we'd all lost to substance abuse, and here I am holding his obituary fourteen short months later. When his mom, Ann, sent it to me I didn't even want to open the envelope because I knew that seeing it would make it real. Now I had to address the overcrowding in my emotional prison. For the first time in my life I asked for help in coping with these feelings of loss.

"I'm sorry for your loss" Ms. Femino stated sincerely as I proceeded to parole my pain through communication with a professional. As a highly skilled therapist who's been helping me navigate the foreign landscape of feelings since 2017, she's attuned to my emotional triggers and has earned my trust -- a feat in itself. So I was able to open up to her about how affected I am by Alex's unfair and untimely death. The catharsis I experienced from talking to someone regarding a subject I didn't want to talk about really surprised me.

For years I kept my feelings about loss locked away without realizing how unhealthy it is to do so. I'd hear of a loved one's death and tell everyone "I'm fine" while telling myself "Don't show weakness". My therapist showed me just how self-defeating it is to disconnect from pain through avoidance, substances, and misplaced aggression. It was a valuable lesson in emotional courage as Ms. Femino challenged me to "See weakness as strength. Connect to your emotions and use that energy constructively. Remember the good times you shared with Alex instead of focusing on the loss".

Fortunately, Alex left all who knew him a rich inheritance of warm memories. In a 2016 interview with David Boeri for WBUR, Alex selflessly reminded the world how "It's the ability to highlight our potential that we shouldn't just be thrown away". We're talking about a guy whose own abilities as an incarcerated intellectual, artist, tutor, soccer player, debater, and educational advocate personified potential. He studied string theory physics simply because the subject intrigued him. That's the kind of person he was and I'll never forget him. The fact that he's gone at only 31 years old is a tragedy.

Alex and I made history together with the Norfolk Prison Debating Society and he made history again by becoming the first prisoner in Massachusetts to be granted a compassionate release. He died 24 days later surrounded by love instead of steel. I find some peace in that, but what buoys my spirits the most is knowing that even in death Alex is helping people. Boston University's law school created a "Compassionate Release Practicum" in his

honor which will help countless other prisoners find their way home, and for those without housing Ann is working with a non-profit to address that issue too. It's an inspiring legacy Alex leaves for the rest of us to live up to.

Incarceration is an experience in social death. Over the years relationships inevitably decay and former friends fall off like scabs. However, I've met some truly good people in prison who've countered these external losses and Alex easily rates as one of the best friends I've had on either side of the wall. The bonds formed through the shared struggle of prison living are very strong, so it's always extra painful when death shatters our unique fraternity. Like when Ray Credle died on February 20th, 2019 as I was drafting this essay. Ray was a 2nd degree lifer and Vietnam veteran who had served 40 years upstate and was just recently granted parole but never made it out.

The policy constraints upon mourning only further complicate the grieving process by prohibiting outside funeral attendance or the organization of internal memorial services. Doors are the only things getting closure around here. Thankfully, I recall reading somewhere that "The true tomb of the dead is in the heart of the living", so with that sentiment in mind I will carry the memories of my loved ones forward. To Diane, Gloria, Marco, George, Todd, Shawn, Ray, and Alex, I salute you all and miss you greatly.