

DOING PRISON, ONE DAY AT A TIME

By James [REDACTED]

My Twelve Dollar, battery powered alarm clock sounds out at 5:30 every morning rescuing me from night long nightmares, weird dreams of long missed relatives and the pains of all those memories. It seldom changes. I have been doing the same thing for 7,765 days. The morning skies outside my cell window change, but the sound of that alarm clock is always the same.

Sitting in my single cell waiting for the correctional officer to announce, "Count Clear," is sometimes a patience trying event. My small screen TV is such a major help in passing the morning minutes that can turn into a couple of hours or more. The door clicks and I exit to face the other inmate population and the staff. If I can handle things correctly, then I remain "free" to my daily routine, but if not, I can go to solitary confinement and spend a couple of months alone, going nowhere and showering only three times a week. I always choose to be in general population, but that choice is daily challenged by other inmates, rogue staff and my own attitude. Yes, my attitude is my number one enemy. I have adopted a theme for myself: "Doing Prison One Day at a Time."

I look for scenes, listen for others' words and read continuously for ways to keep my attitude positioned to keep me in general population. Here are some of those learning scenes, experiences, and conversations that have emboldened my attitude for "Doing Prison One Day at a Time."

SCENES

Well, early this morning as I walked to the prison dining hall to get my meds, the pre dawn rain had soaked the grass and the ground. As the sun's rays covered the rec. yard, the grass seemed greener than ever. I looked at the ridge above the razor wire fences that surround the prison, and out of the woods and underbrush came four small deer darting out onto the grass running and leaping. The "mama" doe was leading the three younger fawns in a spurt of energy, as if they were discovering the world for the first time. I pointed the scene out

to a fellow inmate and said, "That is the way I want to face every new day of my life." He laughed at me and that I was too old to jump like that. I resented his humor.

But it is true, I can't come out of my cell and housing unit jumping and leaping. I can approach each new day with spiritual and emotional excitement. It is not an automatic attitude, but requires making a new decision every morning in your heart and mind. So, when you step out the door of your cell, your apartment or your home lift up your face to the world with spiritual and emotional fervor. It works!

ANOTHER SCENE

It was an early Thursday morning. I was watching on the rise above the prison outside through my cell window as morning fog was coming through the trees over the top of the mountain. It seemed so mysterious and foreboding, and kept my attention for quite a while. Then, about an hour later, the sun came over the peaks and within minutes the sun's heat burned up the fog... it was gone.

The shadowy figures that resembled officers standing guard around the prison fences were now obviously fence posts. I laughed. The blowing tree tops pushed around by the wind now were green and lush and no longer mysterious.

Wow! It reminded me of my days here in prison. When my vision is blurred by things going on in my life with other inmates and family concerns, causing me to see no good things in my life and in my day. Everything was a threat and I wanted to panic. Satan whispers in my ear that God has left me alone. No God, no family and your friends have abandoned you, too. I wanted to take action, no matter right or wrong, just any action. I thought about writing my son a letter accusing him of forgetting me. I wanted to close myself up in my cell and hide. An inmate friend came to my cell door to borrow a spoon of instant coffee, and I went to the door with plans to tell him, "no." I wanted to snap at him and tell him, "I have no friends in prison."

But after a prayer, or maybe just stopping and taking a deep breath, I can see more clearly now. The blurred vision clears up, the stinking thinking doesn't smell any more and I am ready to smile and be a part of my world again. Prison life is often foggy, but hold on, when the

Sun comes up it will clear your vision.

EXPERIENCE

My heart was just ripped out of my chest. Yes, I am serious. It was not a fight with another prisoner, but it was because of my son's behavior. My eldest son lives in Dallas, Texas, which is at least 1,200 miles from this maximum security prison. He had flown into a West Virginia town about two hours south of me and spoke at a funeral. Then he flew straight back to Dallas, without traveling two hours to visit me. I had not seen him in two years. I was devastated and felt abandoned.

Well, that night I got on my knees to pray and all I could do was cry. I tried to tell God how I felt, but no words would come out of my mouth. It hurt so bad. I just knelt there in silence and cried. But then I felt moaning and groaning come out of my heart. No words or sentences, just painful sighs. After a few minutes, I felt better and quoted the Lord's Prayer and got up with relief.

The next morning, I was sitting on the bench along the sidewalk in the rec. yard of prison. I could see the double fences with razor wire running across the top to keep me and 1,200 other men locked inside. The warm morning sun felt good on my face, overcoming the cool windy breeze. Crows flying above me got my attention as they cawed to each other, I guess. I watched two of them as they soared in the wind. I noticed one of the crows found a spot in the air and spread his wings. His wingspan was wide and sturdy and he did not even flap them, but began to soar higher and higher, until he was almost out of my sight. I could not hear his cawing. I realized that he had found an updraft in the morning and used that force to go higher and higher with no effort at all on his part.

Then it hit me. Last night as I knelt on my knees at my bunk, heart broken, I found a place in the spiritual realm and just knelt there crying while the Spirit lifted me higher and higher until I felt the relief I desperately needed. What a moment!

SOMEBODY'S WORDS

"If there is anybody up there, please help me," was the cry of a man who had just

fallen off a cliff in Arizona. He had caught hold of a small scrubby bush and was holding on for his life. Looking below, he could see the rocky ravine waiting on him at the bottom should he lose his grip. If that happened he would certainly die a horrible death. How long would the bush hold him up? How long could he hold on to that bush?

Now he is praying for someone to rescue him. He suddenly hears a voice booming out of the heavens, **"Trust me on, let go of the limb and be saved."** The terrified man was silent for a moment and then replied, **"Is there anyone else up there I can talk to."**

Well, the story brought a smile to my face. But how many times have I prayed for answers from God about something going on in my prison life. Someone was trying to extort me or make me pay rent in prison. The threat of getting beaten up because I would not go to the commissary to buy somebody I didn't even know \$25 worth of groceries. Then one night it happened to me. It was almost dark and a man came up behind me on the rec. yard and told me that he was going to rape me. I was terrified. What could I do? He could rip my head off my shoulders in a minute. Then something spoke to my mind so real. "Start singing an old hymn called, Amazing Grace." I paused and started to run and the man grabbed my shoulders and kept me still. Like the man on the cliff, I needed to hear from someone else. But in fear I started to sing, "Amazing Grace How Sweet The Sound." I kept on singing until I finished the first verse and turned around to see the man 100 feet away, going into his housing unit. I stood there for a minute, shaking and crying, then and took off running to my pod and my cell, thankful for being rescued.

Listen to your heart and maybe the voice from heaven. It just might be the right thing to do to make it through prison trials.

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