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The Prison Experience

With my birthday looming only days away, I reflect back on my prison experience thusfar. I am inmate #251821 in Indiana's Department of Correction in Pendleton, IN. It's March 2020 and soon I will have been here exactly 3 years. It's an easy thing to track, because I arrived at Pendleton on my actual birthday... oh the irony! Needless to say, my last 3 birthdays have not been so great, but I digress. I want to discuss how life in prison has affected and changed me over the last 3 years. Though my outlook is often bleak, and my days are riddled with anxiety and worry, more often than not, I try to remain optimistic and, at minimum, realistically hopeful. This has not been easy.

Often I reflect on my current situation and two words ~~come~~ come ~~back~~ to ~~my~~ mind. Compassion and empathy. Prison has actually strengthened my belief and practice of thought and actions dedicated to these two ~~words~~ ~~concepts~~. Mainly, this can be credited to my search for and study of existential philosophy, but also I must give credit to my recent discovery ~~of~~ of Buddhism. It's the former that I'd like to discuss though. Specifically, the concept of Existential Humanism, its relation to the prison experience, and ^{subsequently} who I've come to be in the last 3 years (5 if you count the time I spent in ^{23 hour} ~~isolation~~ isolation in the county jail). So, what is Existential Humanism? Well,

it is a system of beliefs rooted in atheism/agnosticism that asserts the notion that life, at its most basic core, is ultimately absurd, which leads itself to ~~be~~ ^{lacking} ~~any~~ real meaning or purpose. We as sentient human beings must live and one day die with the fear, anxiety, frustration and futility of knowing / contemplating the absurdity of our own existence. As a result, we must strive to live in the moment, day to day, in hopes of identifying and discovering the actual purpose, which defines the essence and meaning behind our lives. This is ultimately different for everyone, as the meaning behind a life is defined solely by ~~each~~ ^{each} individual. This is existentialism, or rather, existentialism ^{can be} defined as the search for and study of life's ~~meaning~~ meaning, as defined by the individual.

Humanism can be defined by the belief that human beings and humanity as a whole should be viewed ~~as~~ a fundamental source of value in relation to defining ~~our~~ ^{our} existence. Each and every person carries ~~the~~ individual responsibility to think about, evaluate, re-evaluate and ultimately determine the meaning and/or purpose behind his or her own life and its relation to the betterment ^{of} ~~or~~, at ~~least~~ the acknowledgement of the ~~need to serve~~ ^{need to serve} ~~humanity~~ humanity. As human beings, this requires us to ~~take~~ take responsibility for our own, individual actions, decisions, thought patterns and the

resulting consequences from our choices.

Finally, we as sentient, self-aware, intelligent, free-thinking beings must strive to rebel against the conceptual absurdity that is life... to sort through the chaos, find order, and somehow make sense of our lives (or at least die trying to improve our understanding of self). For me, this means trying to live an honest, fulfilling, self-affirming and authentic a life as possible ~~now~~ ^{that's} dedicated ~~to~~ to the notions of compassion and empathy towards others given the current resources, conditions and parameters provided to me by my current situation... a 50 year prison sentence to the Indiana Department of Corrections.

The way I see myself and my current situation, ~~I~~ ^I can only choose one of two paths during my long-term prison sentence. A road of bitter regret, resentment and despair resulting from a "dohewing" of the human condition, which I feel that prison and ^{its} "so-called" rehabilitative efforts are actually dedicated to based upon my current experience. ~~and somewhat limited observations.~~ Or ~~a~~ ^I person can choose reflection, meditation and self-imposed affirmation in an effort to somehow better ~~myself~~ ^{myself} ~~and~~ ^{by trying} to give back to humanity, however large or small the contribution. Prison has allowed me to reflect upon, hone and develop these concepts and ideas. It has not been an easy road, but it

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has proven fulfilling, despite numerous hurdles, moments of oppression, anxiety, depression and hardships.

What I try to remind myself of is the simple fact that without this experience, concepts like Existential Humanism and a life devoted to ideas like compassion and empathy for others who suffer or have suffered such as I, is a life worth living and also a life worth learning more about and redefining. A light exists at the end of the ^{proverbial} tunnel for incarcerated individuals as well as those ~~now~~ living outside concrete walls and metal fences. ~~Everyone~~ ^{Everyone} needs help in some form or another, and I want to be there for them if possible, in hopes of one day healing myself in the process.

I hope that this essay helps your cause and remains true to the parameters that your organization set forth. I'd be happy to contribute more, and feel free to provide my contact info to those who'd like to write me. I'll do my best to reply. Until then, thank you for this opportunity to be heard.

Sincerely,

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