

# What is Prison Like?

To describe prison life is a difficult task. Violent scenes from movies, television dramas, and newspaper reports have clouded the public's perception of what prison is really like. Prison is not like a country club; or is it like a dungeon, a cave, or a torture chamber. It is far worse. I am ashamed that my wife and children have a husband, and a father, who has seen the things I've seen.

Upon entry into prison, a guard told me, "Prison is what you make of it." In

a very narrow sense, that is true, although one certainly cannot make it into a vacation. Another guard told me, "Prison is a learning experience." That's true; however, the same can be said of a heart attack.

Every new prisoner portrays a false image of what he considers to be toughness. This "mask" he wears is to hide the fact he is so scared that he really doesn't know how to act. He cannot show kindness, because kindness is considered a weakness. And to be weak in this environment is to invite pain. It is impossible to be gentle in a world where nothing is gentle. One must play a role, act a part for the benefit of the hateful eyes of those who would rather spit in your face than smile at you.

Try to understand the chill of walking by another convict's cell and seeing clotting puddles of blood from the slashed wrists and arms of one who couldn't take it any longer. Or watching another's mind snap under the strain until he becomes a human vegetable from the heavy doses of anti-depressants forced upon him. At that point, he has also become easy prey for the homosexuals.

Up until my incarceration, my concept of a homosexual was one of a weak, feminine man who had womanly characteristics. I imagined that they would keep quiet about their sexual preference in hopes of avoiding getting beaten down by "fag-bashers." But in prison, it's quite different. The biggest and most muscle bound man can just as easily be gay. He doesn't "request" your sexual company, he demands it. And if you resist, you will definitely have to fight. Even for the non-gay convict, a trip to the shower means that he will be showering with at least three other men. It is not uncommon for him to be the object of another man's masturbation fantasy while lathering up. It's like living in a fish bowl; one cannot even sit on the toilet without an audience.

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The daily and constant attack upon one's soul forces him to turn off his emotional process. To be a prisoner is to be completely stripped of your identity, to become a faceless number among many. It is a total denial of self.

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So what is prison like? Prison is going to sleep at night wondering who, if anyone, is missing you. It is hearing a favorite song on the radio that transports you to the exact time, place and feeling of when she last said, "I love you." One would

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rather be transported to hell, a distant cousin of prison, than to be ambushed by memories in such a manner. Prison is nonchalantly waiting

for mail call the way an alcoholic might wait for happy hour. It is hardening your heart to hide who you really are from the contamination of this sick society. Guilt or innocence is no longer the issue, only survival.

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