

ZENLESS

Oh ugly day. If you've ever packed up everything you own in the world into laundry bags on a blistering hot day, lugged it all 332 steps to a dingy gym and, watched helplessly as chronically unemployable, petty-minded bullies used misguided authority to pick through every personal effect while disposing of whatever they saw fit - then you know exactly what I mean.

The worst part of today's "major shakedown" was my inability to master my attitude. I let the bullies shit in my head. My only consolation was that I never let them see how much they got to me, hopefully spoiling a bit of their relish. But in my mind and heart, I allowed their venom to circulate; years of carefully cultivated peace and self-control discarded in an instant.

I should probably give myself a break. I haven't done too badly buffering my mind over the years. Authority makes tyrants out of so many people who may have once been courteous or shy, or normal and likable, but give them unquestioned authority and suddenly the demon is born. I learned a long time ago to swallow my pride and indignation in this nest of ubiquitous Hitlers. I have absolutely zero control over anything done to me. Lock me in a cage with no water, cuss me and abuse me without reason, castigate me whenever the urge strikes, I am helpless. Helpless. My natural inclination is to lash out the way so many prisoners do. Or nurse such a chronic and cancerous resentment that civilized thought becomes an anomaly. But that's a loser's irony. The only control you have, the only part of you that these tyrants cannot dominate, is your attitude, unless you let them. There are moments of peace and contentment even here, but only if you relinquish your ego and notions of justice.

It's not easy. People's perceptions are powerful and it blisters the soul to be stigmatized, to be considered disposable. The way you're treated by others has such an impact on the way you see yourself and the world. It requires Herculean effort to keep your sense of self, to be a conscientious person - but it's possible. I've found it so very hard to erect protective barriers around my essential being; faced with the vileness, I attempt to withdraw into my mind's inner bedroom and close the door, hiding until the latest tyrant finds another victim. Of course, this compartmentalization of the mind is what many severely mentally ill people do as well, and there's a danger I might someday be unable to find my way back, but it will be a madness of my choice rather than theirs. Unfortunately, I'm not always fast enough to close the door of my bedroom and the bad guys win.

The bad guys.... Is that a joke? These upstanding officers of justice with the American flag patch sewn on their Confederate gray uniforms? Everyone knows it's the inmate who's the villain, the criminal, the scum. Yet, think of life for a prison guard in Texas, an under paid, under-appreciated witness and participant in society's largest scale of legitimized persecution. Thousands of hours spent in such an environment isn't going to beget gentle morality and in some ways, the guards are more corrupt than the inmates. Not all of them, not even most of them. There are good people in every situation, but even good guards face a great deal of peer pressure to never exhibit kindness or compassion in any form to a prisoner, and frankly, guards aren't paid to be the good guys.

Actually, the door to my soul's sanctuary gets left open more than I care to admit, especially during "major shakedowns". Despite all of my meditation and discipline, a major shakedown leaves me vulnerable to the anger and humiliation I keep trying to forbid myself. What's crazy is, when I compared myself to the prisoners around me, I always thought I had an advantage in avoiding the impotent outrage. I sort of took pride in my stoicism, but on shakedown days, I seem to be the only one who becomes truly angry.

Not only is the average inmate seemingly unperturbed after a shakedown, it's like this place takes on a holiday atmosphere. When our masses come back from being violated in the old gym, guys are louder and laugh easier, just intoxicated with relief that the nightmare is over. Up and down the cellblock you hear friends shouting at each other, some of them gleefully exclaiming that they didn't lose anything during the shakedown, not a damn thing! So full of joy you'd swear they were given gifts rather than merely being allowed to keep what they already owned. Other men will lament the loss of their radio or cherished magazines, but the bitching is insincere, unintended to change the celebratory climate. Me? Call me Scrooge.

True, I was once among the majority. I remember the dread, the "lets just get this over with" set of mind, and I remember the blessed alleviation when it was done. Well, time tempered all of that. I no longer kill myself with stress in the beginning and I'm far from ecstatic when it's over. I pretty much view it as a root canal all the way through.

We average three major shakedowns a year. They lock everyone in their cages for a few weeks and then search the prison. During this time, inmates only come out for a shower three times a week and all meals are sack lunches: two sandwiches per meal. In Texas prisons there are major shakedowns and there are random shakedowns. Random shakedowns are the real thing, they're about security. Major shakedowns are about the exercise of authority and spring cleaning. "Random" isn't meant literally, this type of search happens because they suspect an inmate has serious contraband like drugs, weapons or cellphones. Or because they pissed off the wrong guard. Major shakedowns aren't intended to find any real contraband and they rarely do. We are locked down and have plenty of notice to dispose of or hide any serious contraband before the search. The whole lockdown and major shakedown are not taken very seriously by guards or inmates; it's really just about going through the motions. I won't go deeply into the psychological reasons behind major shakedowns but they have the same elements as military boot camp rituals, designed to make individuals more submissive and pliable to authority. I'm unsure if that's the primary goal or the secondary goal behind scheduling major shakedowns, but the other part of the goal is to rid the prison of excess inmate property and nuisance contraband. Nuisance contraband is defined as excess magazines, newspapers, clothing and plastic containers (an empty chip bag has many uses for an inmate: a cooking container, a storage place for pencils, pens, etc., protecting envelopes from the humidity, organizing paperwork and much more), water bottles and too many groceries from the commissary. The more property I have as an inmate, the more difficult it is to find real contraband in my cell in a genuine shakedown. Just by making me carry everything I own such a long distance, they know I'm more likely to dispose of excess property. But even if I'm strong and stubborn enough to lug the load all the way to the gym my property is still measured and pared by the guards.

Most inmates end up saving more than they can legally store. I'm not sure why; perhaps we are overcompensating for having so little. Whatever the reason, most of us are sort of pack rats, not wanting to throw anything away.

It's always stressful to cull your property before a shakedown and we spend painful hours doing inventory of our meager possessions. Which is more useful, the bag of colored pencils or the dictionary? Which means more to your heart; the bundle of your daughter's letters or the photo album with pictures of her? You don't want to choose, but choose you must.

It's even harder for lifers like me who have no family or home. Short-timers usually have family then can send their excess property to and retrieve it when they're released. Permanent loss is the lifer's only alternative.

I may possibly have more personal property than a Buddhist monk, but I can still fit everything I own into a small box. For most of my life I have idealized the notion, assuming that the less material I owned the simpler, peaceful and spiritual my life would be. I still believe that but frankly, less material definitely doesn't equal more comfort. It's amazing how attached one can grow to the most primitive of material items, and being forced to relinquish them really hurts. Material sentiment seems exclusive to the human animal. A favorite shirt, chair, cup... don't we all value something? We extend friendship to the inanimate and it must be hard wired into us: witness the child's bond to a teddy bear, doll, or blanket. I bet the commissary could sell pet rocks and we'd buy them, certainly we're lonely enough. A photo, birthday card, a bundle of letters from a loved one...how do you forsake these items like the worthless wood pulp they really are?

After two decades I still have the memorial service announcement from my mom's death. It's not heavy, doesn't take up much room, but given my storage limitations, every little thing adds up. I should've rid myself of this thing years ago. I certainly didn't get to go to the services, and it's printed on cheap, yellowing paper. It has a theme song I know my mom found completely lame. I never even look at the damned thing, who wants to be reminded that the last person in the world who truly loved you is dead? Yet I cannot bring myself to throw it away. Someday a vindictive guard will trash it for me and I'll thank them. And hate them.

I've had a love affair with my artwork for a long time. I'm no artist born, I usually correct a thousand mistakes to obtain the realistic detail I so admire in visual arts. Even the smallest drawing can cost me many hours of intense labor. So much effort I cannot help but feel that each piece of artwork contains a piece of my spirit. But in this brick world, I'm not allowed to beautify my cage in any way, not with artwork or photos. I'm not sure if it's intentional, but I cannot think of any form of beauty that's allowed in a Texas prison, I tried to store my artwork just so I could pull it out and explore it sometimes, but it's impossible to keep something delicate from being damaged when guards are not exactly gentle with your property. So I've made an effort to kill my bond to my creations, knowing I cannot keep a single one.

Is it loneliness that makes people cling to material items? Loneliness is a simple fact for prisoners. Even people you call friends are kept at a distance if you're wise, because the first rule of prison is that you must never trust anyone - and for good reason, you are already helpless, to trust is to empower, and a friend can quickly become an enemy. I certainly

haven't escaped the loneliness. I find myself befriending the most unlikely suspects. Most of the cages I've lived in have had a resident t Daddy Long Leg spider. If not, I quickly find one and bring it home. I name them, feed them and think about their well being. Call me crazy, but I've been known to even talk to them. Not philosophical conversations...they are after all only spiders, not dogs. Instead I settle for apathetic uglies that scurry away every time I attempt to pet them.

When it comes to possessions it's almost embarrassing to admit which one I value the most: a plastic jug. Oh, it's undoubtedly useful and convenient, but worthy of affection? Its' pathetic how much I dread losing this plastic bottle. True, they only sell small cups in the commissary and containers of any volume like mine are hard to come by in prison. My bottle is made of sturdy plastic that won't melt even when full of boiling water, has a large mouth for convenient cleaning and merely possessing it encourages me to drink far more water than most inmates, which is important in a prison system that suffers heat fatalities every year. My jug is irreplaceable because they don't make them anymore. It used to contain spices, which is how it entered prison. A kitchen that cooks for 5,000 men requires large everything and the spices used to come in these coveted containers. Yes, my jug is invaluable and convenience extraordinaire, yet my ten-year attachment to it is ridiculous, especially since its loss is inevitable. No one should ever waste energy worrying about the loss of a disposable container, but I do. It's contraband. Any guard who sees it has the right to confiscate it and punish me. Inmates always ask me how I've managed to keep it so long, especially through so many shakedowns and, would I consider selling it? The answer is that I've jumped a thousand hurdles, undertaken superlative measures and hid it the way some prisoners hide true valuables like money or jewelry and, my baby isn't for sale at any price!

A major shakedown is designed to find minor contraband like my drinking jug. Tape, rubber bands, paperclips, and other inconsequential but useful items, meaningless to the average person, but immensely handy to us dregs, is what they're after. A red ink pen is contraband only because it's not sold in commissary like black pens, but for someone who does art it's a wonderful tool, hard to obtain and painful to lose. There are hundreds of harmless items an inmate treasures that are considered contraband and these are what the guards are searching for. Obviously the term "major shakedown" is an oxymoron.

Then there's addiction; every person alive has one. Drugs, cigarettes, and booze are the higher profile and judged ones, but religion, masturbation, television and sugar are just as powerful. Even tiny habits can become problems, I had a cellmate who stressed out when he had fewer than a hundred cotton swabs. I found that amusing, but his distress was real. Addictions, no matter how innocent or "positive", are marbled with pain.

As a free person I was addicted to snow skiing, movies, fast food and bad relationships; those dependencies died cold turkey when I became a prisoner. But addictions don't disappear into a vacuum, psychologically, something must take their place and mine were replaced by books. Books? That's positive right? Everyone should read and learn; few pursuits are more virtuous....not. Like I said, even addictions labeled positive are toxic by nature. Books weren't a tool for learning or entertainment for me, they were an escape. Just as a junkie eagerly taps her vein to obliterate the pain, I buried myself in inked paper. There were days I spent 16 or more hours in a novel. Whole days lost forever in someone else's imagination. There was really no difference between me and a druggie or religious zealot, and

the withdrawal symptoms were full of suffering. Several times I have been locked in a cage with nothing, not a single piece of paper much less a book. I could only escape with memories, which bring tears, daydreams that grow stale and Zen meditation, which becomes laborious after a few hours. There was simply no escaping the agony of reality.

It's foolish to pigeonhole anything though, including addiction. I'm quite convinced I would've suffered from true insanity if books hadn't provided relief. My dependency on escape reading has been tempered significantly over the years, but books remain a drug of sorts. When I'm living in the pages, this vile prison reality recedes and I become part of the human story again, finding love, adventure, sentiment and beauty. Tempered or not, it's still an addiction and I nurture a terror of being without books. So of course I overcompensate. Despite the severe restrictions on what I'm allowed to own, my cage overflows with books. During a major shakedown, this becomes a form of distress. I pay other inmates who have less property to carry some of my books through, but I still lose some to the bad guys and it hurts every time.

Today, four beloved volumes were confiscated from me. I thought I had sufficiently pared my possessions down over the last few days. I was wrong. They have a new system involving a red plastic milk crate. With the exceptions of shoes and appliances, everything you own must fit inside the crate, or else. This new crate system is very unsportsmanlike because while we have sparse storage in our cages, the space we do have in our lockers and shelves is twice that of the milk crate. As if this weren't disappointing enough, they put an insolent child in charge of the shakedown in the gym. A gung-ho sergeant who wears his fragile ego on his sleeve, a man who throws his authority around like a pubescent big sister put in charge for the first time. This inane antagonist insisted that no property peek over the rim of the crate - god help you if a jar of peanut butter edged a millimeter over the rim!

Many an inmate got away with stacking property above the brim when Sergeant Big Sister wasn't looking because out of the thirty or so guards shaking down, only the sergeant considered a level relevant. Unfortunately for our protagonist, I had no such luck. I remained the object of his tyranny the whole time. I wonder why he picked me? Perhaps my eyes didn't show enough submission, or maybe I resembled an enemy, or perhaps he saw in me the greek god of a man he could never be. Just kidding. For whatever reason, he picked me. Ordinarily I would've been up for the test, after all, it's not like I don't encounter hyper alpha males every day. I usually laugh, greeting such adolescent antics with apathy. But Sergeant Sadist caught me when my emotional immune system was already under siege. As I sat on the polished concrete, packing my property into the crate, trying to use every available inch, he stood over me flinging obscenities and spittle into my hair. I attempted to keep my expression Zen, but my hands betrayed me with trembling as I hastily stuffed the crate, sweat literally forming a puddle beneath me. I wore only a pair of boxers and I kept slipping as I scrambled around the crate gathering my belongings spread all about the floor and the Singing Sergeant Obstacle Course. Then I cut my finger on a stray razorblade, and every book I touched became stained with sweat and blood. I got so flustered and full of anger I felt my eyes well up. Meanwhile Sergeant Scourge was joined by a sycophant female guard whose profanity was far more eloquent than his. They finally told me I had less than ten seconds to finish packing the crate or they'd take everything. I was so close to standing up and speaking my mind. So. Close. But my intelligence stepped up and pulled me from the brink. Ten years

ago I wouldn't have given a damn, I would've told the sergeant exactly how I felt and maybe even given him a fat lip. Not only would this have cost me all of my material comfort, but an unwitnessed and handcuffed beating in an empty cage smelling of stale piss. Today, I managed to react like a wise Buddhist monk...or like a sheep.

I stood up and carried the still-not-full milk crate to search table without a backward glance at my abandoned books. It's funny how something so important a few minutes ago can become meaningless in an instant. All the careful planning and agonizing over what to keep or sacrifice - all that idiotic self-inflicted pain. For nothing.