

ACCEPTANCE

By Brett May

If only I knew the words to describe such a rank and putrid stench. The kind that invades both of your nasal passages, assaults your sense of sight and smell then hunkers down till evicted. As distinctive an odor as urine, vomit, or death; one whiff of it and any resident of Calipatria State Prison knows, the smell of Calipat's kitchen and adjoining chow hall. Undoubtedly, they also know the feeling of sadness that sinks in with the realization that our food is prepared in this filthy and despicable hall.

Surprisingly, one of the most powerful human interactions I have ever experienced took place in this dreadful chamber, elevating it to one of hallowed halls. This particular morning the nose pollution was only mildly offensive, I scarcely even noticed the sour aroma as my LWOP brethren filed in and formed a semi-circle for a somber affair. Prompted by an LWOP Alliance Group (LWOP-AG) writing assignment, the purpose of this gathering was to deliver our own eulogies in an effort to gain deeper insight into the impact we've had on the world, and the legacy we would inevitably leave behind.

After a brief greeting and introduction by the Facility Captain, we formally initiated the proceedings by reciting our "Positive Affirmation for Success", then immediately opened the floor. The first brave soul raised his hand, strode forward, then shattered the ice as he began reading aloud. Far from eloquently written, the way that he boomed each word combined with the brutal honesty of his self-awareness was captivating. Mid-way through his eulogy, he spoke of how he had become a murderer and his eyes welled up with tears. Valiantly, he spoke through the tears even as they trailed down his cheek, never once pausing to wipe them, or shying away from the vulnerability he displayed in the moment. Instead, he owned his heartbreaking legacy of having destroyed everything and everyone he had ever cared about; then died in prison alone. I remember hearing myself utter an audible, "Damn..." that I intended to keep silent. Before he concluded his eulogy he paused and lifted his gaze to find an entire room listening with rapt attention; then closed his composition pad, thanked us with humility for attending his services and returned to his place in the circle.

The tempo for the morning had officially been set, the bar raised to a level that demanded us to come correct or not at all. The occasion had been christened with the strength of a man's tears, permitting no space for the weak or faint of heart. When the next man stepped forward to speak I became acutely aware of my surroundings. More than a few of these battle-hardened men were stone-faced, but glossy-eyed. Others squirmed about, noticeably uncomfortable with the emotions that gripped them. The few representatives of custody staff appeared to be fascinated by such a ruthlessly raw display of self-deprecation and truth-bearing. Accounts specific to the LWOP experience, but more so the way that these men described how it felt to endure a sentence with no hope; it mirrored my own sentiments, almost identically. In that very moment I remember being struck with the realization that the best way to describe the LWOP experience is: it's like mourning the loss of your own life, but the period of grief never stops. However, to describe what it *feels* like to serve an LWOP sentence is something different

entirely. It feels like the human equivalent of the process that turns grapes to raisins, or plums to prunes – harsh conditions and time. Like an execution in time lapse, or a murder in slow motion; a painstakingly slow process of coming to the realization that although you are not dead, you will never again be among the living. These thoughts and images propelled my mind right out-of-body, transcending myself and this gathering to a place of reflection.

I thought back to the countless cells that I have inhabited throughout the years, the “miniature deaths” within stone cages and the myriad of desperate thoughts that I lobbed off their walls. Counterbalanced by my Father’s one request when my world was spun out of its orbit and into this land of no hope. An appeal to me that would one day become my mantra, “Son, do great things no matter where you are.” Words that I weighed with misunderstanding for many years, interrogating the concrete box that was my cage; its only reply, resounding silence... A silence that left me to grapple with an oxymoronic ideal, greatness in prison. An entire decade eluded me before I learned that creativity and constraint are strange bedfellows. I learned that anything short of accepting my lot would deny me internal freedom, that internal freedom would only be found by taking the focus off of me and directing it toward others; and disrupting the cycle of distorted beliefs that brought me here. Along this path I found meaning and purpose, essential elements to breathing life back into an otherwise shallow existence. By embracing them I discovered both the tools and the makings to create a better me. These treasures were catalysts that ignited the fledgling flames of hope within me. Not only had I begun to walk in fulfillment of my Father’s words – I had begun to step into greatness.

Mind still out-of-body, I began visualizing each of my LWOP brothers as cadavers garbed in prison blues. Their faces the picture of serenity in this raucous environment in which we thrived. Some of them aged and weathered by many more seasons of sweltering heat or bitter cold. Others with their faces permanently frozen in time, just as they looked in that moment; death having stealthily arrived by some unforeseen occurrence: violence, illness or overdose. One eulogy after the next, stories overlapping with traumas that intersect; each of us in some way responsible for the death of a human being. Collectively, our LWOP-AG community directly responsible for no less than 40 people being buried before their time. Each of them and their families, with stories that overlap and dreams that intersect. The sum of us now inextricably woven into the patchwork of American crime & justice, an all too common segment of the fabric of our society. Or a mosaic of broken people, bunched together to depict some sort of bigger picture I’ve yet discern. I began visualizing myself as the deceased; physically transformed by the heavy hands of father time, the inherent stress of prison living and my stubborn resolve to hold on to dear life for Sharon May. A bone chilling visual that abruptly jarred me from my out-of-body experience, just in time for me to step forward to deliver my own eulogy...

Now back to the present tense with a sobering fact: presently, upward of 5,000 families have paid the ultimate cost of our admission into this shameful club. Often times, our LWOP community and advocates tend to lead with statistics as to why the LWOP sentence itself is unjust; I too am guilty of this practice. But imagine, if those whom we LWOP’s have sent to their graves could awaken to tell their tales; of the terror-filled moments that they experienced before life left their bodies. Without question, in the face of such brutally honest accounts an LWOP sentence pales in comparison to the suffering we’d exhume from such a sad and somber discourse. I know this to be true because I have conjured up

such conversations with the man whose life my actions cut short. Initially, his truths reduced me to a puddle of tears; but in time, his truths became my strength to face a new day. It was only when I examined my actions through the lens of this imagined dialogue that my regret was shaped into true remorse.

I am under no illusions as to why I'm here or how I arrived. I cast the die and set in motion a series of events that resulted in a death by another's hands. Though ignorant to the felony murder rule when arraigned, I learned all too quick that ignorance to the law is not a defense. For this I stand, lawfully convicted of ignorance and impulsivity, but not murder. This doesn't negate the human cost resulting in each and every LWOP sentence, a sad and sobering thought. Therefore, we all deserve to be rocked by every sensation of this California LWOP experience.

Do I believe that the LWOP sentence itself is unjust? I don't know that there is any definitive answer to that question; justice isn't blind, it is rife with opposing perspectives: victim and offender, their respective families, prosecutor and defender, those whose aim is to uphold justice and those solely focused on their own ambitions. Lastly, we must never forget those we unwillingly thrust into the role of eyewitnesses, as a result of the sometimes brutal nature of mankind. Justice has any number of informed points of view, making it much less a question to debate than a noble ideal, or a matter of perspective. Morally, I myself cannot advocate for the LWOP sentence. This experience has taught me that there are far more men serving this sentence that are redeemable than not. However, I can empathize with those who prayed that I would receive an LWOP sentence or death, because of what my presence on this earth represents to their world.

I accept those sentiments and all else that I cannot change, such as bearing the consequences of my actions. Truthfully, I would bear them again if it meant the next and future generations would be hidden from the horror that is LWOP. Those "miniature deaths" that I was experiencing throughout the years, they were consistent with the first four stages of grief; deaths of: denial, anger, bargaining and depression. I am fortunate to have survived them and moved beyond the grief to the fifth and final stage – **acceptance**. Acceptance is a liberating agent, one that places the full scope of your power within your command. In acceptance I found the faintest glimmer of something I lost and thought I'd never find; HOPE.

Something I now know all too well, are the difficulties of coaxing and stoking the embers of hope into a sustainable flame. The act of sustaining that flame over the long-haul is more magic and art, than skill or science. Not only is it mentally, physically, and emotionally taxing; it's psychologically damaging enduring what is "death by incarceration". But encapsulated somewhere in this magic lies the true resilience of the human spirit; steadfast, and ever at war with hopelessness and despair. For there are many faces to this LWOP experience, many of them warranted; but still I ask, "for a lifetime?" Could it be that our compassion has been blinded by our desire for vengeance? Or is a new era of human decency on the horizon, with demands that a "road to redemption" be staked out for construction?