

The Untallied Cost

We all knew that there is a financial cost associated with incarceration. It is one of the largest expenditures of tax dollars, as well as one of the largest industries in our state. Prison costs. There's no two ways about it. But incarceration also has a toll. A toll exacted from those who serve sentences, and can't be ~~be~~ counted in dollars and cents, but rather in tears shed and anguish felt.

For incarcerated people, particularly those serving lengthy or life sentences, loss is something that you will become intimately acquainted with. There is first the loss of your freedom, some would call it the forfeiture of; then there is the small pieces of your dignity that are chipped away as you endure the conditions of your confinement, strip searches, observed urination and defecation, and a general lack of regard for your humanity by those in authority. ~~Other~~ Other losses we experience while incarcerated, is the loss of personal relationships. Girlfriends and wives unable or unwilling to sustain these bonds under such trying conditions. Friends you discover don't truly hold the level of fidelity you previously believed; family members who cut ties because they are mortified by the nature of your crime, or angry at the shame or stress you brought upon your family with your actions. And the loss of connections with our children. Unable to maintain those bonds when the mothers' or their new partners are less than enthusiastic about your influence.

All of these losses hurt, and they all bear scars, but not even these losses can compare to the anguish of having someone you love die while you are incarcerated.

As a person serving a lengthy sentence, you think about it, while

simultaneously trying to ignore the prospect. As if you can ward off the inevitable by depriving it light. Sometimes we pre-emptively distance ourselves from loved ones we believe are in danger of passing, as a way of insulating ourselves from the heartbreak, which constitutes a whole other type of pain. The truth is any forestalling we do is futile, actions we take to try and curb the helplessness we feel when seeing our loved ones suffer.

I have recently had one such devastating experience. In the 14th year of my incarceration, I lost my little sister. I struggle to describe her death. To say she died, or is dead, seems perverse, vulgar in some way. But to say I lost her or she passed seems inadequate to express the hole left in my heart by her absence. Either way she's gone, and I'm struggling to come to terms with that new, dark reality. This loss in particular was the worst kind we experience while incarcerated, the unexpected death. To all of a sudden learn that someone so young, vibrant, healthy, and full of life, is gone. It was the most jarring news I'd ever received. And the manner in which the news was delivered to me didn't help matters any.

On the day that I was informed of my sisters' death my Correctional Counselor, a man who meant well, but was ill equipped for the task, I was called out of my cell, and told my sister was dead. In the immediate moments after the news was delivered, I vaguely remember an offer to speak to mental health officials, which I declined, a clumsy offer of condolences, and given one 15 minute phone call before I was sent back into ~~to~~ the cell I share with the stranger I ~~met~~ met only a week before. So I sat, trying to process what I had just heard, trying not to cry in front of this stranger, unwilling to share my grief with someone unfamiliar.

The decision to deny counsel from a mental health official was

mine alone and made for my own reasons; based on my personal opinions about the quality of care and dedication to duty of the mental health officials employed by CDCR. But I would charge the fact that I wasn't even given a cursory evaluation after learning that one of my closest, lifelong, relations had died is proof positive of the ineptitude I perceived and a dereliction of duty. Someone who has just been informed of this type of loss should not go unevaluated and sent ~~back~~ directly back to 23 hour a day lockdown with a complete stranger while trying to grieve. It isn't humane and it isn't conducive to maintaining mental health.

The experiences that we endure while incarcerated have a profound effect on who we are when we rejoin free society. Some of the hardship and discomfort we experience is by design; after all prison is supposed to be both a punishment and a deterrent. But there are these experiences that go beyond crime and punishment; and enter the realm of traumas. Traumatic experiences do not aid in the rehabilitative process and do not serve as lessons learned. They scar a person's psyche and warp one's perception of reality. Someone being unleashed on the public after enduring such experiences doesn't help that person and certainly doesn't serve the community. We have to develop a more compassionate way of incarcerating people and interacting with those who are incarcerated; or else continue to repeat the same failures and perpetuate the ever revolving door.