

THE WELL PLANNED LIFE

This past Christmas my father sent me a pink one...really? A pink planner for your son in prison?? And yet, I love it. Not because it's pink, but because I'm addicted to planning. Before my arrest, I worked as an event organizer and my planner was an extension of my arm. I refused to use the newest in-vogue app and preferred my leather bound IRL version. I even had a special pen I used exclusively for writing in it. I don't know what I liked more, the feeling of importance it gave me or the shot of endorphins I got everytime I checked an item off my to-do list. But, then I came to prison and thought to my self: self, what the hell do you need a planner for in here where every minute of your day is pre-scheduled and exactly the same as the day before? But I was wrong, if ever I needed a planner it is here in this human warehouse. If ever we need purpose, hope, or a reason to even get up in the morning it is in this concrete jungle where rows and rows of us are buried, but not yet dead.

In the past, I've used up to three planners at a time. I'd have one for work, another to track my meals and exercise and still another for personal use. This year, my family was only able to send me one medium sized, pink, plastic weekly organizer. Even with the Covid quarantine lock-down cancelling most inmate programs/school and in-person visits, I still struggle to fit everything I want in it. You may be wondering, how many to-do-items could he possibly have when he's locked in an 8x12 iron tomb for 23 hours of the day? Well, that's because there's a lot more to planners than to-do lists.

I'm trying to stay healthy and avoid gaining the quarantine 19, therefore, I use the first couple lines on the daily schedule to post the daily menu, track my meals; post my exercise goals and track my progress. Also, because I have digestion issues, I use this space to track my bowel movements.

The next line is my 'spiritual' space. I remind myself to pray and meditate; and jot an inspirational quote or Bible passage; and identify three things to be grateful for; and name at least one friend or family member to connect with that day via either a call or letter; and lastly, I schedule some downtime for myself, whether that means solving some puzzles or playing cards with my cellmate.



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As an aspiring writer, I use the next few lines as my 'work space.' I jot down book and story ideas, track my submissions, schedule writing projects, and post any upcoming deadlines. But, its greatest use, in my writing life, is as a motivational tool to remind me to write every day. Also, I've learned, that reading is at least as important as writing to a novice author, therefore, I also use these lines to keep a record of my personal and professional reading homework.

The next line is for the 'prison hustle' (the trade and exchange of goods and services on the black market). This is where I keep track of any debts I owe or owed to me. Paying your debts in prison is a must -- you do not want to be known as 'that guy' unless you want to be met in the shower by 10 guys ready to stomp your ass.

Next comes my 'household' line. I use it to remind myself to clean my cell, do laundry, and any other cell-related obligations.

Now it's time for one of my favorites, the 'commissary' line. I use it as my shopping list, adding items as I notice I'm running low. I also note new items mentioned on #inmatetwitter (aka the rumor mill) or save a new convict chef recipe. And, of course, to identify our shopping schedule.

Another favorite is my TV schedule space. I make note of any new shows, season finales, movies, or important sporting events and music or awards specials. As a bit of a TV junkie, I use this space profusely.

Probably one of the most important uses of a planner is as a journal (i.e. diary). In prison, it is imperative we self-advocate for any personal or medical needs we may have, therefore, tracking doctor visits, counselor meetings, grievances, et cetera becomes crucial when addressing issues. (I write on this line in all CAPS.) I also use this space to remark on any significant prison 'events' for example, the day we went on quarantine lock-down (April 1) or the night a storm blew through the prison and knocked out our power for 2 days (May 20), and more personal moments like when I am moved into another cell or I get a new celly.

And lastly, I have my 'to-do' reminders. This is the space where I track expiration dates on my permits, the dates to request new clothing or glasses;



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birthdays and anniversaries. I also use this <sup>space</sup> ~~space~~ to occasionally remind myself of my long-term goals; sometimes that's as simple as writing "Be Better" or as specific as telling myself to do one act of selfless giving that day.

At this point, I'm out of space having used up every line all the way to the edges of the page (and you thought I wouldn't have enough to fill two lines). But now you may ask, what's the point? So what? Well, I'll tell you the point: it helps mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Experts agree that there is plenty of evidence to suggest using a planner can help improve mood by way of managing stress. It even has a name: Planner Peace. I don't know about all that, but I can attest that before using my planner in prison I often felt like I didn't have anything to look forward to and I don't need a therapist to tell me that's a short trip from full-blown depression. Using a planner gave me items to check off which in turn gave me a sense of accomplishment which is often hard to find in our austere regimented world. Also, it is a way of celebrating life and understanding that even this time is important, whether I'm in prison or not. It all boils down to both giving myself something to do and a reason to do it.

That being said, if you feel out of sorts, especially now in these turbulent times, might I recommend you try to secure a planner -- even a notebook would work in a pinch. Start small. List simple obligations, jot down weekly plans for work, personal life, and such. Keep a space for memory planning (recording what happens) and go from there. If you're feeling stressed or anxious some experts encourage writing cheerful slogans or motivational quotes. My top tips for novice planners:

- Keep your planner in a designated space where it is always easily accessible and in plain sight. Commit to updating twice daily, upon awakening and before bed.

- Keep a nice pen with your planner and always write as neatly as you can. Take your time when planning your day or week.

- Remember to check off items as you complete them and move unfinished items to another day. Take a moment to note your progress daily and weekly.

Planners aren't some magic panacea. When the COVID crisis hit and my mother fell ill I struggled to fill the pages. Days passed without so much as a peep in my planner, but I knew I needed to get back to my routine. So, I started small, writing things like "watch Shameless episode" or "share a celly meal." That's okay, one day I'll look back on those days and know that's when I struggled. Those blank pages will speak louder than anything I could have written.

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