

BABY BUDDHAS

After sentencing I was transferred to Savage-ville. There are no words big enough to describe the utter mind-warp that is your first time in a maximum security prison. Every day I was falling deeper into the well until just a slight ray of light was left. It happened early that first summer. I couldn't sleep (again!) and was trying to watch the sun rise through my small dingy window when I saw them out of the corner of my eye. But, what were they? They looked like...dogs maybe? No, that couldn't be. They were brown and furry with pot bellies standing upright, faces towards the sun, paws in a prayer position, motionless -- they looked like little Buddhas meditating.

They were ginormous groundhogs which had been living inside the prison walls for generations. Inmates, for all our of our faults, treated them kindly, like beloved pets until they were essentially domesticated and would eat right out of our hands. One inmate even taught them to walk the yard on a leash. Every morning there they'd be meditating or praying or whatever -- whatever it was they looked so peaceful, so content, it soothed me.

During my yard sessions I would bring them snacks. They especially like peanut butter and learned to open and squeeze it from the commissary packs I was able to purchase at store. They were endlessly fascinating and brought me hours of joy -- I was quickly obsessed with them.

I woke up before dawn -- before the jungle sprung to life -- and quietly watched them assume their sun worshiping positions for about an hour. They didn't move, I didn't either. They looked up at the sun, soon I was as well. My cellmate thought I was meditating...maybe I was.

These meditation sessions made me think: these baby Buddhas are in prison too. Yet, they don't seem to mind. They live here by choice; they could surely burrow under the wall at will. Is freedom subjective? Are we only as free as we believe we are? I always believed the worst thing about prison was the loss of freedom, but I was wrong; the worst thing is the feeling of loss of hope and purpose. But, that is a mental choice. Maybe I had more power than I previously believed, even in here.

A year has passed since I first saw the baby Buddhas and now, I rarely see

see them (don't worry, they're fine). I don't have time anymore. I have a job, I volunteer to teach Yoga, I attend faith services and educational programming; I am writing apology letters to everyone I have ever harmed. I attempt to live with purpose. To challenge myself to become the best version of myself; to return to society and be able to provide some value: to redeem myself. Living this new path consumes me and has offered me hope and belief for a better tomorrow and that hope has brought me a newfound sense of contentment, even happiness.

The universe often puts people and things in our lives in an effort to direct our lives towards our ultimate purpose. It is our job to search out these tiny messages and then follow them fearlessly. Today, I know, that is what brought my baby Buddhas into my life. Maybe I'll bring them some peanut butter today and thank them.

By Leo Cardez (please use pen name)

Please accept this as my permission to edit at will and as necessary -- no further approval needed.
