

On Counting

W.E. Roberts

How does one count in prison? Do we gauge the weeks like prisoners in a Hollywood film and score the walls of our cells with crude hash marks or tabulate the days on a makeshift calendar by crossing off each passing sunset? Do we estimate the hours as if a child anxiously awaiting the arrival of Christmas, a birthday or some other milestone of life? Surely, we do not calculate the months as do our courts and the Bureau of Prisons when pronouncing and executing a sentence on us; an insidious way of disguising the years each of us will waste, languishing in the stasis of governmental warehousing. Does it seem worse this way? Shall I look into the eyes of my fellow prisoners and watch our lives slowly trickle by in a never ending stream, passing through the front gates, shackled, shamed, and angry, like a collection of disinterested riders on the bus who get on and off at their prescribed stops sharing merely a fragment of the journey... lost, lonely, and uncertain?

I suppose we could choose to steer by the times we have missed with our loved ones, but the pain is pernicious and the cuts too deep. I have sadly seen the slow death of my marriage. I have been absent from my brother's retirement, my father's birthday, my mother's funeral, the fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Ramadan and Cinco de Mayo. I have missed a presidential election, the Chicago Cubs long-awaited return to respectability, along with a number of senseless tragedies and deaths in our world. I have lost the chance to share far too many moments of joy and accomplishment in the lives of those I love, to hold them close and cry together, to ease their pain and my own. There is an agony in counting. Sometimes, it is necessary to relinquish one's self-identity and become numb. I am no one. I no longer exist.

For those who have not been here, it cannot be understood, just as we cannot understand the struggles and daily pain others must endure as a result of our mistakes. Each day behind these walls is saturated in futility. Each day is like the last, endless and bleeding into one another. I am wounded and lying in a pool of sameness, mercilessly withheld from the placid release of my own death. I suggest it is more humane to hang us or place us before a firing squad — to yield, to cease being, to pass away. It is preferable to die with what is left of our dignity, rather than live in shame and abandonment, better to be put to death for our transgressions than to continue living as exiles within our families and communities.

So many people here will fail a “transition” once released, unprepared and without support. Some will violate probation or parole and commit another crime. It must be acknowledged that the failure to reintegrate is a failure of our prison system and a calculated outcome of our nation’s institutionalized “justice”.

Do not fool yourself into believing prisons are only instruments of justice and punishment. Our jailers want us to come back and seek our defeat for the perpetuation of their own existence and the profit of the prison industrial complex. The ignorant masses have been traumatized into fearing prisoners and cannot stomach our presence. The risk of once more trusting a flawed human being outweighs the damage done to that human’s soul in the name of “protecting” society. There is nowhere to go and no place for the prisoner to call home. It does not make any difference how we count, for our lives were over on the day of our arrests. One and done.

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