

This morning at about 6:00 am, I woke to a feeble scream. “MA-AN DOWN! MAN DOWN!” It was almost time to get up and ready for breakfast, so I was alert right away. I could tell the screams were coming from the cell in front of mine. I recognized the guy’s voice.

Everything was quiet, but after the weak calls for help, the wing became even quieter. One never knew what the situation was. Could it be a heart attack? An overdose? A cell fight? One can never know. I imagined that everyone who heard the cries for help was trying to figure out who was yelling and what the situation was. My cell-mate got up right away and approached the cell door, trying to figure out what was going on. “Is probably a *dope fiend* who overdosed”, he said, worried that breakfast would be delayed.

“MA-AN DOWN... MA-AN DOWN”, the skinny guy in his early 60s yelled once more, as if embarrassed to call for help. “His cell-mate is probably dead already”, my own cell-mate said, as though unconcerned by what was happening.

After about a minute, the guard, who was already walking on the tier, unlocking the doors to let the wing workers out, looked inside the cell that the yelling was coming from. The guy inside very casually raised his hands so that the guard could see his cut wrists. He had slashed his wrists in a sorry attempt to terminate his life sentence in prison. His hands were covered with plastic bags so as to contain the blood and when he raised his hands blood dripped down from his elbows to the floor.

“Look what he did”, my cell-mate said, shaking his head. “He cut himself. I guess he couldn’t wait until the *Board* lets him out... He must have demons in his head... I guess he changed his mind about killing himself... If he really wanted to die, he wouldn’t have put bags over his hands to hold the blood... Some people are just too weak and can’t handle prison”.

By that time the guard had used the radio to call for medical assistance, they were already there. Breakfast was delayed by about 30 minutes, but, other than that, everything ran normally – just like on any other day.

There are many people living behind bars who do not care what happens to their neighbours. Many do not believe in depression or believe that depression is something only weak men get. But every time I hear the words “man down”, I feel uneasy.

Some people may think that suicide is the coward's way out, but after twenty years behind bars the body gets frail, sick and old. Worse than that, without the possibility of ever getting out, it is understandable that one might want to *check out* before becoming another elderly, sick, lonely man in prison, with nobody to take care of him.

It is a peculiar thing to see how lonely a person can become, even in a crowded state prison. Some prisoners have nobody to talk to about their personal problems – it is hard to open your heart to someone who may later use it against you.

Carrying a heavy load alone is not an easy thing to do – this I know very well. I have been through illnesses, losses, deaths of family members, streaks of bad luck, waves of depression and fear. And I have had to act as though I was living on top of a rainbow.

I understand why someone would rather go out that way than wait until he dies of old age, or worse, dies a violent death. For you see, in prison, one does not have many choices when it comes to dying.

As for the guy who had slashed his wrists, if he was having personal problems now and had nobody to talk to, I cannot even imagine how he will be in another twenty years.

At breakfast, other prisoners were talking about how they wished the “man down” screams had been because of a cell-fight. That would have been more exciting for them. Those comments made me sad and the thought of someone dying alone, even in this crowded place, made me want to cry. But of course I did not. I would not want to look like a wimp.

After breakfast, some prisoners went to school, others to work, and others to the yard. But I stayed in my cell and organized my property. I wanted to have everything in order, just in case one day I feel the pressure of time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victor Becerra is incarcerated in California. He can be contacted at:

Victor Becerra, K09324
CTF-Central
P.O. Box 689
Soledad, California 93960-0689
USA