

Looking From the Inside-Out

Janus V.

I was in the prison yard on a Thursday, the day after writing class, trying to find a place to be alone. A spot, somewhere in the middle of the grassy area far from the track and picnic tables, seemed the best. After serving six years on a ten-year sentence time alone becomes invaluable.

When I was committed to the women's division of the state prison, everything I had was taken from me. I was only allowed to keep one pair of glasses, one plastic afro-comb and my underwear. From that moment on everything I owned was either purchased from the commissary or issued to me by a clothing officer. I believe the current value of my estate to be approximately \$65.

The room I was assigned, my "home", houses six women and two mice. The bunks are made of industrial steel and I sleep on a four-inch mat that is intended to serve as a mattress. A-wing, Bunk E-Room #2; where I live for the time being. It neither is nor sounds comfortable. A good six months passed before I became accustomed to sleeping on that metal slab. At night, when we are all in bed this place could pass for a morgue.

I found, as time passed, I no longer felt attachment to material things. Instead, I started to value those periodic moments of uninterrupted thought – however rare. Having a long conversation about recovery from addiction is another authentic experience that I highly value.

Serving a long sentence often has an everlasting impact on the mind. There is definite need for something that will maintain some semblance of sanity. We, prisoners, all agree; going without a TV is possible, but going without a radio is not. The music ties time into a tangible continuum – "I remember when... my present dreams for the future are...when I get out I want to..."

What goes on inside the mind is the only place that cannot be searched by 'outsiders' unless, of course, one starts talking or opts to share. Hope, dreams and good intentions are safe when *strip-searched*.

I've seen fire and I've seen rain. I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end, I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend. *

Listening to James Taylor on the radio reminds me of the good times past and lets me think about those to come. I have been classified at every level of security during my time. However, while I was classified at

minimum status, I had a rare opportunity, one few women in this prison will ever have. The Department of Corrections decided to work in partnership with Habitat for Humanity. As a result, for six months (September 2007 until March 2008) I was part of a 12-woman crew where twice a week – Wednesdays and Thursdays – we worked to build a single-family home for the White family.

Each day I had a crash course in carpentry. I have dug four-foot holes, cut dozens of 2x4's to blueprint specification, and hammered more nails than I ever wish to count. The site supervisor, *Alex* was impressed with the accuracy of my measurements. Therefore, I became the *chop-box* or table saw specialist. Even through the colder months when I was outside cutting studs, cutting window-frames and cutting siding, I was not bothered by the cold temperatures. All I felt was a great sense of confidence in a selfless job well done. With a circular saw and a pair of goggles I *almost* know what it feels like to have a penis.

Been walking my mind to an easy time-my back turned toward the sun
Lord knows when the cold wind blows it'll turn your head around. Well
there's hours of time on the telephone line to talk about things to come...
Sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground.

My job as a chop-box specialist continued when we moved indoors to work on the interior of the single-family home. *Alex* pointed to a stack of floor-tile boxes, three-high by three-wide, and handed me a utility knife and a torch. He explained how to heat and cut the tile to fit around tables and doorways. I was left alone with the tools of the trade that the Department of Corrections would never permit a prisoner to have in her possession. Remember, in the mind-set of the Department of Corrections I was capable of burning down a house after murdering all of the occupants. But, instead, *Alex* saw me as a good woman willing to work – a woman good with measurements and details (I wonder if the way to redemption is found through ironic situations).

Many times I would return to the minimum building – my prison residence – tired and sore. A long hot shower and a couple of Motrin was my idea of heaven those days. But, without a doubt, the next morning I would be awake 45 minutes early in my coveralls ready to go. Another day out in free-world full of hope. Another day away from the barbed wire and

industrial steel. Another day to share good-times on out ‘outside’. A day on site was a day I wished would never end.

In late March 2008, the project was complete. The White family had a cozy affordable home and we, the 12 women crew, marvelled at the accomplishment. So now I am back inside, the building project was over. I spend my days as a laundry porter; my evenings on the phone with family and friends. As the seasons wear on, my hope has worn out.

By the fall of 2008 depression set in. I started losing my appetite. It, depression, progressed to insomnia. As a result my mood changed. When the holiday season came around, those around me, especially correctional officers, knew something was up. I was agitated, hostile and unpredictable. In prison, this sort of change in behaviour is cause for disciplinary action. I ended-up in segregation for 21 days for verbally assaulting a fellow prisoner and a substance abuse counsellor. Indeed, being combative toward staff is a big no no!

On February 10, 2009, the day I was sent to *seg*, I can clearly recall that I was not in my state of mind. Although I had lost 21 days of *good-time*, it did not seem like much of a loss given I was serving ten years. I had earned six months of good-time working on the Habitat Project; even though it was one of the better times in my life. Yes, I was physically in prison, but, mentally I was both free and happy. From my point of view, no matter where I am, if my state of mind is poor then everything around me seems worthless.

While in *seg* I became horrifically aware of the fact that in only a year, four seasons, I would be released. Some long-timers become overly excited about gaining freedom again, but being the cerebral person that I am I felt scared. I could not help but think about all the *stuff* I had not needed to think about for years while I was a ward of the state. Being under state ‘care’ had stripped away my self-reliance; it was gone the day I was committed. This cage of a prison designed to confine me had become a comfort. Given I was ‘relieved’ of caring for my own basic needs upon my sentencing I had become dependent on the state for my day-to-day living.

Housing, food, health care, income, transportation; all the basics most people take in stride in daily living would become a brand new reality for me, once I was released – an ex-prisoner. Where would I live? What would I do to support myself? Who could I trust for help? These hopeless questions became my mantra for my uncertain future. But the greatest threat to my future was, simply, my anger. I was still angry. Over the years as a

private citizen, I learned to suppress anger along with all the reasons why I felt so angry. I dealt with emotional pain by self-medicating. Alcohol and promiscuity was the prescribed remedy for a lifetime of pain.

Before prison, I lived in a state of denial; my lifestyle was destructive. I was a toxic person, incapable of sustaining a healthy relationship with anyone – on any level. I had just one close friend. I was estranged from my family and my romantic relationships usually lasted no more than a year. I reached a point where all I could do was self-destruct. If I continued to carry with so much emotional baggage, anger, it would have consumed the rest of my life.

I understood James Taylor’s lyrics: “sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground”. His lyrics resonated with me. Life lost its excitement when hope is replaced by fear and doubt. It only took a few hours alone, in *seg*, in the solitude of that prison cell before I fell into a major destructive episode where my past and present collided. I recall how hot my face felt as my head began to pound and a steady stream of tears soaked my t-shirt.

I cried myself to sleep that first night. Once awoke, I started to cry all over again. I did not realize how many days had passed – they bleed together in the solitude. It took about four days before I had enough strength to eat and shower. For more than 96 hours, on and off, I cried; tears of anger, fear, and pain. I cried for myself – the nine-year old girl who was molested by a family member. I cried for my teenage self, who suffered years of physical and emotional abuse from a dominating grandmother. I cried for the emotionally crippled woman I had become, who feared raising her own children. I cried for the life of *K. D. Wright* I had taken on March 4, 2001. Then, I cried for my own life that had forever changed when I was given a 25-year sentence with 10 years to serve and 15 years suspended or on probation.

In grieving the past and present loss, I felt totally alone – “*lonely times when I could not find a friend*”. I had experienced so much and very few living people knew the truth. My secrets were literally driving me crazy.

Won't you look down upon me Jesus. You've got to help me take a stand.
You've just got to see me through another day. My body's aching and my
time is at hand. And I won't make it any other way...

I was aware enough to ask for help. My breakdown had become a turning point in my life. I had experienced effective mental health treatment in the

recent past. As a result, I knew my breakdown would not get the best of me. I requested to see the Mental Health Clinician, *Dea*, who had worked with me while I was in *seg* and several months thereafter. She referred me to the prison Psychiatrist, *Dr. Cole* – a good doctor who I hope stays around for a while. The women here in prison need a psychiatrist with genuine concern – someone who cares. The Doc and I agreed on a new regime of medication and activity. I realized it was time to let go of the baggage. But I also learned that letting go does not mean forgetting. My past is, and will always be, a major contributor to who I am today. Yes, I am more than a collection of memories, but the memories are mine; I have a right to treasure all of them and they shape me.

Consequently, after segregation I was downgraded from minimum-to maximum-security. On the second shift of the 21st day of *disciplinary segregation time*, I was transferred to A-wing, room 2/bunk E, maximum security. Before I even had time to unpack my laundry bag and make my bunk the second shift officer on A-wing called out to me with a new prisoner job assignment. Clearly, sick days or vacation time do not exist in prison – we only get *seg-time*.

This year seemed like the longest winter of my life. When it stopped snowing in the early spring it started raining and then it rained some more. Spring and summer of 2009 was just wet! Now, it is early October 2009. I find myself standing in the middle of the prison yard looking from the inside out. It is less than two seasons away from my release. The radio helps me keep time with my hopes and dreams for a new life as a private citizen once again. I have a second chance at living. I do not want to waste it on being angry. If so, I will never be free.

Thanks JT for being such an inspiration at such a major turning point in my life.

*Sunshine bright and warm
No murky water colors to corrupt the daylight,
Moonlight clear and cool.
No phantom stalker in the starless night.
Just good morning and good night.*

– *Janus V.*

ENDNOTES

- * All musical references are to *Fire and Rain* by James Taylor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a bi-racial woman from the United States and proud to be the mother of two beautiful adult children. My journey through change as a prisoner in the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Facility has given me the tools I needed to overcome any adversity I may encounter in my day to day living. Currently, I am working as a Peer Support Specialist sharing my experience strength and hope with men and women in transition. Thank you for your interest in my writing.