

Check Out Day

Michael Rothwell

There's always a way out of prison, any prison, and it can be done right now, today. The authorities can't stop you. Well, they can slow you down if you're careless, but they really can't stop you if you're determined enough.

It's called "checking out", or "taking it to the vent", or even "moving on to the next phase". Sometimes I think about the guys that were with me when I first came into prison who are no longer here. And I'm not talking about paroling. Some are gone from disease – a few to cancers and a couple more to heart attacks – but the vast majority were done in by their own hand.

I think the all time winner for originality would have to be Ben. He was a neighbor of mine in Folsom that lived a few doors down, and I spoke to him a few days before he left. We were talking law, and he was trying to explain the "doctrine of laches" to me. It has to do with time constraints in getting your criminal case back to court. It was all but gibberish to me, so I pressed Ben, who was a well regarded jailhouse lawyer, to help me deal with this issue of "laches".

I'll never forget the faraway look in his eyes as he told me he had something coming up that would prevent him from aiding me with my legal work. My initial reaction was that I thought he was having trouble with someone, and fixing to get in some sort of wreck which would likely result with him ending up in the hole – a common enough occurrence in these places.

I told him that whatever the problem was, I'd take care of it one way or another. I really needed to get over this legal hurdle to having my appeal heard, and I needed someone who, unlike myself, knew what they were doing. Again, I got that thousand yard stare, and he said, "No, it's not that. It's just a personal thing I have to deal with". Right there, that should have been my first clue. But my attitude was, whatever, if he wasn't going to help me, then I could accept no, and I immediately began focusing on other avenues to get my legal work done.

I didn't give another thought about what Ben had said until a couple of days later when I was at work in the Watch Office and a call came in that there had been a suicide in my cellblock. The office I worked in was between the cellblock and the Infirmary where they would take any dead body, so I knew I'd get a good look at whoever it was as they wheeled the

corpse on by. It was Ben. His last words to me now made perfect sense. He definitely had something else on his mind, all right.

As a clerk, I would type and process all the reports involving any “incident”, such as a suicide, in the facility. What Ben did was take an ordinary electrical extension cord and cut it in two with toenail clippers. Still using the clippers, he stripped the insulation back a few inches on both ends where the wire had been cut. On the half that didn’t plug into the wall, he took most of the rest of the insulation off, and wrapped it around himself. He put a wet washcloth in his mouth – I always wondered if that made any difference – and slugged the other half into the wall socket, but without touching the now live end to the one he was wrapped up in so it didn’t complete the circuit.

After that, he lay down on his bunk with both exposed ends of the wire in hand and then held them together. I found out later from one of the guys that worked in the library that Ben had been studying all the books dealing with electricity he could find. He had rather ingeniously figured out how to wrap himself up in a way that didn’t trip the circuit breaker as he was gradually cooked.

I thought about how many times I’ve been shocked, for just a second or two, by an electrical outlet. Maybe a dozen times, give or take, when carelessly changing a light bulb without unplugging it first or what have you. It’s not a pleasant feeling, but it’s sure not going to kill you right away either. Ben had to actually hold those wires together as he was slow-roasted by the 120 volts. That’s determination.

By the time they got his remains to the Infirmary, which was several minutes after they found him, his core body temperature was still well over 120 degrees, at least that was as high as their thermometer went. Flesh literally flayed off his bones like the meat off a rack of well done spare ribs. Later, a bad joke on the yard was that you could stick a fork in him – he was done.

Another guy I knew, Dusty, got the job done without as much finesse, but still got to where he wanted to go. I had known Dusty for some time and watched him parole out of prison twice. The final time he came in was with a multiple Three Strike sentence, I think it was 75 years to life, and I reckon Dusty had had enough. He never hurt anyone that I knew of. He was pretty much your run-of-the-mill drug addict who stole money to feed his disease.

He lay down on his bunk when his cellie was gone and positioned himself sideways with his legs up on the wall and his head hanging over the side to insure the blood would rush towards his brain. He cut his jugular vein with a razor blade, and bled out quickly. He left behind quite a mess, but at that point I don't guess he cared much.

They usually transfer us around to different prisons every few years or so, and during my tenure with the Department of Corrections so far I've seen too many check outs to recount here. Suffice to say that most guys who choose to go out that way simply "hang it up". Braided strips of torn sheets work just fine. A lot of guys don't even bother to braid them. There's always a vent handy or in the old prisons, like San Quentin, bars on the front of the cells that will do nicely. And it was there in San Quentin, that I witnessed my most memorable suicide.

It was Christmastime, but the season of joy for much of the world often turned into deep depression for some of the denizens of that gothic "Bastille by the Bay", especially in the hole, where I was serving a "SHU" (Security Housing Unit) term for being caught in possession of a weapon. Other than a few hours a week on a tiny yard you were locked in your four by nine foot cell virtually all the time. Whenever you came out of your cell you were cuffed up and under police escort. It was in the SHU that I began to fully appreciate what the term "stir crazy" meant. I certainly noticed it in the people around me.

Folsom prison, of Johnny Cash fame, is nicknamed "Dracula's Castle" by the convicts in California. I always thought San Quentin should be dubbed "Frankenstein's Laboratory". Built primarily in the 19th century, everything there is old and colored in cheerless shades of grey. It looked, and living there felt, like something out of a bygone era.

At the time, Donner Section in South Block was pretty much the end of the line for the guys who had gotten in trouble for one thing or another throughout California's other state prisons, and it also served to house the overflow for the condemned from Death Row. Donner Section filled only a quarter of South Block, but it was still enormous. Five tiers high and 50 cells across it were built in the fashion of traditional prison architecture from a century or so ago. San Quentin and Folsom were California's original prisons, with each of their main cellblocks designed as "a building inside a building". The inner building was constructed in the form of a large block honeycombed with a lattice of cells and infrastructure. Another building,

which is basically a shell enclosing the block of cells, was supposed to serve as a barrier against the elements, but usually the temperature inside was the same as the outside. On the inside of this outer shell, at heights equal to the cellblock's 3rd and 5th tier, were catwalks for a guard who always carried a rifle, and who had a fairly panoramic view of several cells and tiers at any given point. That outer shell kept most of the rain out, but for those of us destined to spend our days bound in prison culture, it's the inner cellblock where our lives' dramas play out.

There was reading, "fishing" (passing items via handmade lines from cell to cell), and exercise (lots of pushups) to spend one's time; but you had to be on guard, for Death stalked those ancient tiers. Clinical depression was what could give the Reaper the key to your cell. Don't say it couldn't happen to you. Better not to tempt fate. You had to always be on guard against succumbing to conditions that can spawn a state of mind so foul it can cause a young man in the prime of life to want to leave this realm. No matter how upbeat you may feel, there's always a part of you that's miserable. If not, then there's something really wrong with you.

Make no mistake about it, prison is punishment. People suffer. People die. Months and years in that kind of environment can twist anyone's mind to some degree. I don't think it's a matter of just staying strong; I think it's more a matter of never letting your guard down. Don't let it get to you. You have to be vigilant to keep that inner demon at arm's length. It's always going to be there, so you better learn to keep it at bay. One way is to keep doing those pushups. They help.

The cops are supposed to patrol the tiers a little more often during the Yultide season because people do get more down than usual. But if someone's determined to check out, then there's not much they can do about it. And that's exactly what happened one dreary December night.

I noticed some activity by the three block cops up on the 3rd tier evidenced by the jingling of keys and reflection of their shadows moving on the outer wall. The gunner on one of the catwalks had spotted something that caused him to raise the alarm. A Sergeant and Lieutenant strolled in a few minutes later and trudged up the stairs towards the 3rd tier. Everyone knew something had happened when the brass actually walked the tier. The Sergeant and Lieutenant left after a minute or two, and then a couple of the cops walked slowly back down the stairs towards the fiberglass Stokes stretcher located on the 1st tier that hung on the outer wall in plain view of

the cells. Their younger counterpart remained on the 3rd tier by the cell in question. The two cops getting the bright orange stretcher were taking their sweet time, obviously trying to eat up the rest of their watch. At that point, I still wasn't sure if there had been an actual death in the block, but I knew something was up. Be it a sprained ankle, stroke or suicide, I figured the speed of their response would be about the same.

There's an old saying I heard long before I ever got there that goes, "If you want to see the scum of the earth, just go to San Quentin . . ." and, after a pause, "at shift change". This is an old saw familiar in virtually all penal institutions out West, and these two cops fit the description of a couple of grizzled old bulls. They looked like they'd been there for decades, and their demeanor suggested that they had seen it all. The removal of a carcass, whether dead or alive, was just one less body they had to deal with that shift. In other words, business as usual.

Hushed talk snaked its way down through the block. There was indeed a suicide on the 3rd tier. I lived just a couple of cells down from the entrance on the 1st tier, and like with Ben, it was the perfect place for viewing the body, as they had to go right past me to exit the cellblock.

But unlike the fictitious laboratory where unholy life was created in the Frankenstein story, on this very real dark and stormy night San Quentin claimed another victim. The prison itself, or more precisely the conditions there, killed another human being just as sure as if, under its own volition, it had dropped one of its medieval bricks off a wall onto somebody's head. Except the "Q" was much more subtle about it than that.

The whispers started as they always do whenever there's a suicide. "What a weak punk", and variations thereof, were voiced by a few. It happens every time, without fail. It's like the guys who say it are trying to convince themselves it could never happen to them. As if they're better than that. But you can always hear the fear in their voices, no matter how hard they try to cover it up. Every time. As if bad mouthing the dead would prevent anyone, who's in that dark frame of mind, from "doing" themselves.

I think there is a much better way, however, to break just about anyone from ever contemplating taking the "easy" way out. Because, from the suicides I've seen, there isn't anything easy about it, and this was perhaps the ultimate case in point.

A few minutes later the old screws sauntered down the tier with their gruesome cargo, carrying the stretcher head first on either side with the

younger cop helping balance the rear of it. It was like they were taking a leisurely walk in the park. No hurry getting this dead body out of there at all and I wondered if they did this on purpose. Maybe they wanted us to get a good look at him, because he was completely uncovered, naked except for the skivvies he had on, along with the homemade “scarf” he still had wrapped around his neck. Or maybe that old saying about the cops there was true. I don’t know. But I do know that the cat I saw on the stretcher looked like he was about 19 years old and a young 19 at that. He would have looked more in place at a high school dance that night rather than being carried out of the hole dead in San Quentin prison.

For the first time in my life I fully understood the term “death mask”. The handmade noose around his neck consisted of sloppily braided strips of sheet, and his head was bent at an impossible angle in relation to his shoulders.

Evidently, he had been hanging for a while because rigor mortis had set in. He must have changed his mind about his final life decision that night because both hands were at his neck, as though he tried to undo the fix he found himself in while the last vestige of his consciousness ebbed into eternity. His attempts to ease what must have been the ever tightening grip on his throat had obviously failed, but had caused his fingers to get trapped between the makeshift rope and his neck. Both elbows stuck out rigidly locked in place and told the story of the losing battle that played out during the last moments of his life. His eyes were half open, and mouth curled back in a horrible grimace . . . the “death mask”.

At that moment my mind flashed back to an image of a couple of stillborn puppies out of our dog’s litter when I was 4 or 5 years old. It was the first time I had seen death in a mammal. The stillness emanating from those semi-closed puppy eyes looked almost exactly the same as what I saw coming from the dead guy’s eyes in front of me. The total and absolute stillness of the eyes. You would think common decency would dictate any first responder to at least shut the eyes of a dead man, but not so there. Witnessing this was perhaps the best possible cure for anyone in a depressing situation that might entertain the thought of suicide. I don’t care how bad I feel, or how hopeless the situation might seem – I don’t ever want to look like that.

Homeboy made a bad choice that night. He tried to reverse the decision he made, but unlike a lot of us who, at one time or another in our lives

screw up royally, and deservedly or not, get another chance – he didn't. He tempted fate, but fate was in no mood to be fooled with that night. The cops went out and slammed the steel door shut behind them as they made their way to the prison morgue.

Not ten minutes later they were back. It was as quiet in that huge cellblock as it ever was. You could almost hear the mice scampering across the cold concrete floors. Usually there were various types of yelling at all hours around the clock; conversations between cells on different tiers, chess games hollered back and forth between cells with moves called out on numbered squares, and guys casting their fishlines out over the tier and shouting to their intended recipients "Can you see my line yet?" Or just the senseless babble the nuts spew out in order to validate their existence. Bedlam was a good name for it on a normal day. But not right then. There was only solemn silence. Even the crazy guys had shut up.

For the first time since I was there, I could actually hear the footsteps of the two old cops echoing through the cavernous cellblock as one of them, carrying the now light Stokes stretcher, hung it back up on the wall. With a bit of a dramatic flair, he turned towards the convicts in their cells. It was as though he was on stage facing a giant vertical amphitheater – San Quentin's version of the Hollywood Bowl. He had everyone's complete attention. It was so still, the proverbial dropped pin would have sounded like a gunshot going off. Was he going to say a few kind words about the recently deceased? Maybe warn us about the dangers of unchecked depression? A short lecture, perhaps, to be careful lest one of us ever lands the lead role in this tragedy?

The old bull, who obviously relished his time in the spotlight and milked the silence as well as any Tony Award winning Broadway actor, stood there for several seconds slowly scanning the tiers that held his rapt audience. Then, before he walked away laughing with his buddy, just one word bellowed out of his mouth loud enough for the inhabitants of all 250 cells to hear, "Next!".

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Rothwell was born and raised in Los Angeles County. In 1981, he was convicted of second degree murder for shooting one of two men that broke into his home, and was sentenced to 22 years to life. Winning

First Place in the PEN American Center's nonfiction category in 2008 for "Check Out Day", changed his life, he says. He had always been told that he has a knack for writing, but never took it seriously; now he is writing constantly. He has recently completed his first novel, *After the Fall*, "a post-apocalyptic thrill ride through what was once the United States"; he is actively seeking a publisher. He has been the ping-pong champion at Folsom, San Quentin, and Soledad Prisons, and he recently had a six-year winning streak pitching for the Creekside Dodgers. He will be happy to answer all mail from anyone who found *Check Out Day* interesting.

Michael Rothwell #C-10513, B-9-213U

MCSP

P.O. Box 409040

Ione, CA 95640