

When Dreams Die *Charles Huckelbury*

We cannot be what we recall,
Nor dare we think on what we are.

George Gordon, Lord Byron

Depending on which poet or philosopher you read, old age can be a gentle, graduated slowing of physical and mental processes or a rapid descent into chronic pain and senility. Cicero tells us that life is a journey with death the destination. We should therefore shed our excess baggage the closer we get to the grave, accepting what is natural and refocusing our attention on a philosophical examination of what faces us. Move forward nearly 2000 years and we find Dylan Thomas urging us to “rage against the dying of the light” (Thomas, 1952). Nowhere are these two extremes more graphically illustrated than behind prison walls.

Even the most committed supporters of long-term imprisonment will acknowledge the inadequate and often nonexistent medical care in prisons, and I need not repeat the litany of faulty diagnoses, erroneous medications, and needless deaths that attend lengthy prison sentences. Instead, I want to address the psychological and emotional effects of growing old in prison, watching friends on the inside and outside die, coming to grips with one’s own mortality, and dying in a sterile environment, bereft of friends and family and condemned to desultory pain management by people who wish we would hurry up and die and get out of their way.

I entered prison as a young man of twenty-seven, unequivocally believing in a fatalistic philosophy that escalated between denying death’s inevitability and not giving a damn if I hit the Grim Reaper’s lottery. I lived in my personal Bushido, the ancient samurai code of honor that holds as one of its primary maxims that one day is as good as another to die. As I sit here now, two years away from my sixtieth birthday, I shake my head in wonder at how little I knew then. That time changes things, is commonplace, and so it has been for me. I have moved from a dark-haired young man with an endless summer in front of him to a white-haired member of the American Association of Retired People, eligible for senior-citizen discounts if I could use them. And as Wordsworth says, “oh, the difference to me.”

In my early prison years, geriatric prisoners were not yet segregated into their own facilities, so it wasn’t unusual to see graybeards sitting alone in the sun or else clustered together and exchanging stories. Few younger

prisoners noticed their decline, so when their time came to die, they simply disappeared into the black hole of the infirmary's terminal ward. No one gave them a second thought, except perhaps their aged friends who doubtless wondered when their time would come. In other words, dying of old age was what other people did, certainly not me.

That attitude, as prisoners know well, derives from a time dilation of sorts. No matter how long we serve, we remain mentally locked into the year we entered prison. If we come in young, our minds fly to Never Never Land and refuse to grow up. I remember the shock of getting pictures ten or fifteen years into my sentence of people I had not seen since my arrest. The graying hair, lined faces, stooping bodies stunned me because I still thought of those people in terms of Nixon's administration. After all, I still worked out daily and hadn't changed a bit, never mind what the mirror was telling me.

But a subtle process was at work, one that for me most clearly defines the aging process in prison and concomitantly marks the transformation from civilian to prisoner: the shifting of the dream structure. On entering prison, our dreams are those of free men and women. We dream of people, places, and things we recently left, finding consolation in the memories and a ray of hope for the future. Then, as the years slide into decades, the dreams gradually become prison oriented until we dream of nothing else, which denies the very existence of the world we left behind. We wake to discover that we dream of nothing else because, for long-term prisoners, there is nothing else.

Fortunately for humans, we tend to be an optimistic lot, our hopes spring eternal, in Pope's phrase, so that as we near the end of our sentences, we begin to examine our lives through the lens of real-world possibilities. For me, the process began after I had served thirty years and had just made parole.

In anticipation of my release, the prison reduced my security status and moved me into a facility outside the prison's walls. My work assignments reflected the need to move gradually from prison to the community, but most important, I was given the opportunity to volunteer my time on a fairgrounds maintenance crew. I leapt at the offer.

My years of denying the aging process abruptly confronted the rigors of manual labor. Empty fifty-five gallon drums that would have been toys for

me at twenty-seven now required both hands and a lot of back to get onto a trailer. More significantly, I discovered that three decades of imprisonment had not robbed me of my appreciation for life, only suppressed it.

Working in the real world brought me into contact with people who had no agenda. I saw couples and heard children's laughter. I felt wind in my face, and I touched trees. And I felt the ineffable longing for that one special person, my wife. In other words, I discovered by being in the world again that I had grown much older, much older, but along with that discovery came the realization that prison was an artificial construct designed to make me feel old, a tactic that failed miserably once I regained a standard of comparison. And, significantly, I began to dream about the real world again.

During this period of transformation I met Matthew, the eight-year-old son of one of the men who supervised my work at the fairgrounds. Matthew was a handful, a nonstop engine of movement and questions. He was everywhere we worked, doing his best to help and never treating us like pariahs. He made me feel young, and the prison years began to slip away. Until one day at lunch.

All of us ate together, usually outside on picnic tables. Doug and Debbie, Matthew's mom and dad, shared our table as well. On a hot August day, Matthew brought his plate and sat down across from me. He took a monster bite of cheeseburger, wiped ketchup from his chin, and looked at me while he chewed. Finally, he said, "You've been in prison a long time, haven't you?"

I sipped some water and nodded, "You bet, Matt, a long time."

Matthew was typically curious. "How long?" he asked.

I had to smile at that one. "So long you wouldn't believe it," I told him.

He thought about that for a few seconds and then asked, "Four years?"

Four years? I had that much time in the canteen line, but for an eight-year-old, four years was half his life and probably farther back than he could remember.

I put down my water and looked at Matthew. "I've been in prison for thirty years, Matt."

He stopped eating. "Thirty years?" he asked, struggling to comprehend my sentence that began when his parents were younger than he was. He frowned briefly and began, "How ...?" He never finished the question. He seemed to accept what I had told him and went back to the burger. I, however, had lost all desire to eat.

Looking across that table at Matthew brought home to me the magnitude of my loss. For thirty years, there had been no Matthews in my life, no Dougs or Debbies, no picnics in August, no thread of decency to connect me with my fellow travelers, only the long-suffering patience of a wife who waited for a husband who might never be able to hold her when the night turned cold. Matthew reminded me of what I had so carelessly thrown away but also what I was determined to get back. I returned to the prison each night with plans for the future: books to read, places to see, stories to write, and a marriage to cherish. Prison no longer invaded my sleep. I would be home just as the leaves began to turn.

Then, a week after my birthday, the Florida Parole Commission revoked my parole. Citing a minor disciplinary report from 1994 for missing a medical appointment, three people who had never seen me declared that my “history of institutional misconduct” was a predictor of future criminal behavior; therefore, my parole would be “incompatible with the welfare of society.” I was twenty-eight days from going home.

I am back behind the walls again, living in the world of the subjunctive, in which if-sentences describe the chiaroscuro hope that defies reality’s despotism. I have come to accept once more that hope is essentially meaningless in the irrational and absurd world of prison and parole, only “trivially operative where reward and punishment are determined by lottery” (Steiner, 2001). And where there is no hope, we age quickly, wither, and die.

The memories of my year in the world return to taunt me. The people, places, and events no longer seem real, as if they were mere creations of my dreams. Prison does that, extinguishing both optimism and morality if we aren’t careful to follow Andrei Sakharov’s advice to find the strength to keep on living and working (Sakharov, 1990).

Five more years will pass before I have another opportunity for parole, five more years of growing older and more pessimistic. I have already ceased dreaming about life, the real world beyond the walls. If sleep were the haven of Shakespeare’s plays, I would dream of trees and wind and smiling faces and my wife’s hand in mine while we shared our plans. But waiting for those dreams is as futile as the misplaced optimism of Beckett’s characters; Godot never arrived, and Vladimir and Estragon only grew older while they waited.

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