

No Farewells

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One of the harshest things about prison, compared to the real world outside the walls, is the immediacy and totality of consequences for one's actions. In here, a careless or thoughtless word or gesture brings instant penalties. Out there in free society, by comparison, people speak without thinking; they become rude or belligerent, drive aggressively, and generally act without consideration simply because no one has ever called them to account. I worked in the bar business for a number of years before coming to prison, and I witnessed the same phenomenon there. Businessmen would come in after work to talk and have a drink or two, and once in a while, one would let his mouth get a little out of control, as if his authority in whatever office he just left carried over to a much less congenial environment. Usually, an appropriate word or two would settle the matter without events escalating, but periodically an object lesson would be in order. And for middle-aged guys whose last fight was in the fifth grade, the lessons were startling. Legitimate guys, defined as those who work for a living, just did not understand that there was a price for what they said and did. Most still do not get it.

So it was that I once watched one of our older prisoners here, another legitimate guy, pay the price for betraying a tenet of the code that reputedly unites us. Ray, at the time of this particular event, was around seventy; a frail shell of what once was a large and vigorous man. He had a neatly combed shock of white hair above a pasty complexion from too many years inside. Lumbar surgery had confined him to a wheelchair, which he navigated with some difficulty, until his final transfer to the infirmary. In the prison vernacular, Ray was harmless, having never fit into an environment that remained hostile and unknowable to him until the day he died.

His personal problems escalated just before he moved to the infirmary when he had problems with his cellmate over a matter of coffee that kept disappearing at odd times. After eliminating all other possibilities, Ray came to the logical conclusion that his cellmate was stealing from him. Rather than follow accepted procedure and either dealing with the matter personally or else enlisting the assistance of a friend, Ray opted for the most serious taboo in prison: he went to the security officers working in the unit for help and had the guy moved out of his cell.

The repercussions were immediate and poignant to behold. As is the way in prison, word quickly circulated among the other 239 men in the unit, and Ray was quickly ostracized. His erstwhile friends deserted him in droves,

verbally abused him for being a rat and administration stooge, and said they wanted nothing more to do with him.

Prior to the incident, Ray had several people who did small favors for him because of his invalid status. They brought his meals to his cell (he could not go to the dining room with the rest of us), pushed him outside so that he could catch the lowering sun in the afternoon, and tried to make his life as comfortable as possible. Now, no one collected Ray's meals for him from the Control Room, few people talked to him, and no one even held the door for him as he bumped and thumped his way in and out of the living area. Most men sat silently and watched his struggle to manipulate the heavy door without spilling his meal or tipping over in his wheelchair. By his singular act of betrayal, Ray had effectively isolated himself from most of the other men around him.

And that is the ironic part. Ray came from a staunchly legitimate background, one that had no relationship to the environment in which he subsequently found himself. He was a successful businessman and served his country honorably during the Korean War. He enjoyed all the benefits that class and privilege can bring and never gave a thought to prisons or the people in them. Then he ended up doing life for murder. The circumstances of his particular crime are not relevant for this essay; the point is that Ray came to prison when he was in his fifties, and he came with all those lawful preconceptions and prejudices that a legitimate life had kept in place. I did not talk politics with him, but I would expect him to have voted a straight Republican ticket. He was law and order all the way, and contrary to claims he periodically made, he had never fit in here; he had never been a convict. To make that transition would have required disabusing himself of GOP orthodoxy, and even interaction with the criminal-justice system could not accomplish that feat. Ray remained true to himself, which brings me back to the event under discussion.

Men and women on the street pay taxes and expect the police to intervene if they have problems. If someone steals from them, for example, they call the police. This is the way the system was designed to work, and it is the action that legitimate people *should* take. Ray thought like that on the outside and brought the same ideals into prison with him. He never lost them, and he preferentially identified with the men and women who guard us, those who work and pay taxes, rather than the men around him, those who had victimized him and criticized him for the principles he continued to hold.

So naturally when Ray thought someone had stolen something of his, he did what was completely natural: he went to the authorities for assistance. Unfortunately, Ray had never learned that what applies out there in the real world often has little bearing on what happens in here, but he could no more alter his behavior than a bird can refuse to fly. He knew the rules but ignored them because those atavistic tendencies were too powerful.

On a particular day around 11:00, Ray had wheeled himself down to the Control Room to wait for his meal being delivered from the kitchen. He parked near the wall and folded his hands in his lap. I watched him as he sat in his wheelchair beneath low skies that spit snow intermittently. Whoever was delivering his lunch to the unit made him wait twenty minutes, but Ray did not complain. He sat nearly perfectly still while the snow dusted him, his breath puffing lightly in the December air.

When the meal did arrive, tucked inside a Styrofoam container, he balanced it on his lap and began the arduous trip back to his cell, his jaw set, his eyes staring resolutely ahead. The sidewalk has a five-degree incline, but that is difficult to negotiate for a man with very little upper-body strength left. Still, Ray never complained. He pushed himself up that grade, moving the wheels on his chair maybe six inches at a time. He looked determinedly at the door twenty yards away, never expecting any assistance and receiving none. He finally reached the entrance to his quarters and struggled there for perhaps another twenty seconds until he finally opened the door and disappeared inside, doubtless to eat his meal in silence and solitude.

Where was I while Ray made the return trip? Thirty feet away watching. Yes, I watched the bit of drama unfold before me and did nothing. You see, I, too, was one with those who believed in a different standard, although I understood what prompted Ray to do what he did. Ray's behavior therefore neither surprised nor offended me. Indeed, how could anyone expect anything different from the man? Still, he had done enough time to know that enlisting the guards to solve an interpersonal problem was not the way to do business in here. I therefore joined those who preferred to watch Ray's silent struggle than do the humane thing and help him up the ramp.

We each lost a bit of ourselves, Ray and I, on that gloomy day, paying the price for what we believed in and the codes by which we lived. He depleted his meager physical resources during the long trip up the ramp, and I sacrificed a bit of humanity, probably more than I could afford, by refusing to help someone in distress. I could have walked over and pushed him back

to his door and provided a little companionship, and he could have asked for a little nudge, but we both held back; we played the roles assigned to us.

Ray died recently, but years from now I will carry that image of him, pulling and pushing himself up the ramp in the snow and me off to the side, leaning against the wall watching him. And I will always wonder what would have happened if one of us had made the gesture instead of allowing the moment to pass. Reconciliation was impossible, but perhaps we could have acknowledged our mutual humanity and in that way relieved the tyranny of what we both had to do.