

Not Enough Compassion

Donna Barton

The other day our boss let us out of work early for Good Friday. I thought I'd make use of the extra time to get my license renewed. The only problem was that I had left it at the New Hampshire State Prison the day before when I went there to visit my husband who is serving time there.

Being Friday, the visiting room was closed and the officer who was driving the perimeter directed me to the main building. Once I was buzzed in I walked up the stairs; at the top there was an officer standing in an office of sorts, behind bulletproof glass. Separating him from me was a wall of bars and a door made of bars.

He had to buzz me in, and as luck would have it I was familiar with the officer from the visiting room. I knew he would not be much help.

"I left my driver's license in the visiting room yesterday. Would it be possible for me to get it?"

He did not even acknowledge me. He picked up the phone and asked someone if I could get it. The answer was as I expected: No! I wasn't too disappointed. I have done enough time behind bars not to get upset about something like that. Most of the corrections officers are disinterested with prisoners or their families and loved ones.

But, it must have been my lucky day because a lieutenant I knew from when I was in prison walked by. He has always been a decent man, and he asked me to wait after I told him my problem.

As I was waiting, a nurse walked by. The night before my husband called and told me that the older man with the beginning stages of Alzheimer's, who he had befriended had left prison that day for a nursing home.

My husband had become really attached to him and would go to the infirmary every day to get him to take him out to the chapel for sing along or for walks. My husband would give him pepperoni and candy bars.

Suddenly I thought I would like to go to the nursing home to meet this man who had spent twenty plus years locked up for a crime he may not remember.

I walked over to the nurse and asked her if she knew the name of the man who had left the day before to go to a nursing home. At first she looked at me like I was crazy, but I quickly explained who I was and why I wanted his name. A look of softness crossed her face, and in a whisper she said his name. Clearly, she did not want any trouble.

The lieutenant came through for me, so I left the prison with my license in hand. I made the stop to renew it, and then I went to the nursing home.

On my way, I swung into Dominoes and got a double pepperoni and cheese pizza for my husband's friend, and then I stopped for a couple of packs of Marlboros.

When I arrived at the nursing home and found his room, he was lying in the bed. This man had never met me and didn't seem as if he wanted to. He just stayed where he was and gave me a look. I explained who I was, and when I mentioned my husband's name, I could see I had his attention. The nursing aide who was in the room told me that he was not cooperating; evidently the prison was paradise compared to this nursing home as far as he was concerned.

After twenty-something years in prison, the shock of leaving the only home he'd known for so long, the only family he had known, had him very upset. I told him that my husband had told me that he liked pepperoni, so I brought him a pepperoni pizza. He smiled and we started to talk.

He couldn't really finish anything he said and apologized constantly for it. But I immediately knew this old man was harmless, and he was probably harmless ten or more years ago. The extra years he spent in prison served no useful purpose. The nursing home had assigned an aide to be with him around the clock because of his time spent in prison.

He told me my being there had made him feel comfortable for the first time since he got there. I stayed there about four hours. I didn't want to leave; it was obvious he was afraid. We walked down to the smoking area a few times. He got to smoke his first cigarette as a free man with me and was amazed that there were no officers to come and catch him smoking as they banned cigarettes and tobacco-related products from the prison a few years ago.

I know cigarettes probably were not the best idea, but the pleasure they brought him made it a great idea. Plus he got to meet some of the other residents. When it was time to leave, he didn't want me to go, I promised I'd come back.

My husband called me this morning. He was so happy that I had gone to see his friend. I told him I was going to stop in tomorrow to see the old guy before I came to see him. My husband told me his friend always talked about beef teriyaki and pork fried rice. So that is what he will be eating at ten o'clock tomorrow morning.

There are so many elderly people in prison these days. A few weeks ago an elderly woman in her seventies was charged with the murder of her older

sister. She had taken her sister in to live with her and evidently she became a burden to her. She was unable to cope with the challenges of dealing with a difficult person, and she snapped and beat her sister to death. I'm sure she loved her sister or she would not have brought her into her home. But caring for the elderly is a very demanding challenge, and you have to have a lot of patience. If her own sister couldn't have that kind of compassion, empathy, and patience to deal with the difficult times that are sure to come along, how can we expect already disinterested prison officials to? We can't.

It is criminal to keep a person imprisoned once their health starts failing, either physically or mentally. They need special care that I know from experience the department of corrections is not qualified to give.

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