

## **Prison Preserves You?**

*Paul Mancini*

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**W**hen I was asked to write on the subject of aging in prison my first thought was, “Why me? I’m just a kid!” Then reality came. I’m forty-three years old and have spent the last fifteen years behind bars, so I guess I am qualified.

There are many facets of aging: emotional, spiritual, psychological, and genetic. Whether you spend your life in prison or live in the free world, time marches on for all. There are of course variances in lifestyles, some negative and some positive that affect health and ultimately aging, but it seems to me that, in prison, the most influential and often deceiving is one’s attitude or perspective.

“Prison preserves you” is a common adage that circulates among prison populations. I have known several inmates who do not celebrate their birthdays behind the walls because, “time doesn’t count in prison.” When asked how old I am, I have often responded, “Twenty-eight,” as that was my age when I entered prison.

As nonsensical as that may sound, the phenomenon that time stands still in prison is very real in the minds of many. Even in prisons where prisoners have access to televisions and newspapers, it is hard to keep up with the changing times, the progression of time, when the world you live in remains the same day in and day out. The tremendous advances in technology that have become a part of every day life in the free world are a great mystery to those isolated by concrete walls. Cultural changes, things like body piercing, styles of dress, even colloquialisms, may be recognized but difficult to assimilate. The changes, in relationships and the aging and maturing of friends and family in the free world, are even harder to grasp. Our memories seem to produce snapshots in time that freeze people and situations. When I think of my younger brother, I still see him as a young kid skidding in the roadside sand on his little red bike. Even though I have frequent contact with him, it is hard for me to grasp the fact that he now manages his own business and is making mortgage payments on a home. A close friend, whom I know as a guy who liked to drink and have fun, is now a father and the Town Supervisor. But this psychological perspective, this time warp, seems to have a powerful influence. For some it is good. For others it can be devastating,

Hope, hope of the future, hope of a better life, hope of redemption, is a strong motivator. It allows goals and dreams to exist in a place that, by

its very nature, brings condemnation and defeat. Where there is hope, life perseveres and seems to slow the aging the process.

There is another prison adage, “Do time; don’t let time do you.” Regardless of what opportunities prison affords for rehabilitation (education, vocational training, and spiritual development) it is up to the individual to choose how he will do his time. Keeping a positive attitude, being as productive as possible, striving to grow and achieve seems to produce a youthful heart, a youthful perspective that manifests itself in all aspects of life, including health and aging. This, of course, is true whether in prison or out, but when combined with the time warp, it can have a greatly increased effect.

Dreams and ambitions for the future die hard when time stands still. A man just starting out in prison may have hopes and goals for the future, things he would like to do when released. They may be the dreams of a young man that require the energy, strength and boldness of youth. As time goes on, as he reaches middle age, he still clings to those dreams, even though a middle-aged person living on the street might think it foolish to dream of such things at that age. But for the man in prison, it may be all he has. In his mind, he is still the young man who entered prison several years ago. Striving to accomplish, striving to achieve, to fight to make up for “lost time” is his redemption. He is young at heart and clings to that hope that preserves his youth.

On the other hand, this same youthful spirit or attitude may create a great deal of difficulty for the inmate when he is released back into a world that is far different from what he knew. His ambitions may be too far out of his reach, or he may be overwhelmed when the change in times hits him.

The movie “Forever Young,” with Mel Gibson and Jamie Lee Curtis, comes to mind. Gibson plays the role of an Air Force pilot whose friend builds a cryogenic chamber. When a car hits Mel Gibson’s fiancée and he assumes she is dead, he talks his buddy into freezing him in the chamber. Forty years later, some kids playing in the warehouse where the chamber had been stored and forgotten about accidentally release him from the chamber. Gibson comes out looking as youthful as when he went in. He discovers that his fiancée did not die and searches for her. As he races to meet her, the aging process accelerates, and as they meet, they are both the same age.

A prisoner caught in the time warp may have a similar experience psychologically when released from prison. The hope that had preserved

his youth for years, when confronted with a radically changed world full of problems and challenges that were never part of his dreams, may quickly turn to despair as he begins to feel his real age.

But then again, what do I know? I'm just a kid.

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