

Time and Punishment

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If there is one truth about prison it is that there is plenty of time to think. At times it seems that there is too much time. The experience began in a Spartan jail cell. The anger following my arrest was supplanted by anxiety, depression, and fear. Voices of other prisoners reverberated off the cold concrete and steel as men related the details of their lives through distorted lenses.

The many months I spent in jail awaiting trial were plagued with uncertainty. I paced my cage, images of my past flashing through my mind. The faces of my wife, children, family and friends haunted my dreams, and the events that preceded my arrest played like a Hollywood drama in my memory. The film rewound and played again repeatedly, and not even the darkness of night could still the recollection.

For six months I sat alone in my jail cell pondering the events of my life. My memory was clouded with nebulous pictures from my youth. My failures condemned me, and the knowledge that I had brought myself to this place convicted me far more severely than the judge and jury ever could. Despite my private judgment, in public I professed my innocence. During the course of my trial I denied my guilt, but the jury found me guilty of first-degree murder.

Following a brief stay in a reception center, I was transferred to Folsom Prison. The conditions at “Old Folsom” were an extreme contrast to everything I had experienced on the streets. The society within the walls had different rules, and the new “fish” had to learn quickly in order to survive.

One of the first places I visited at Folsom was the education department. I applied for the college program being offered through U.C. Davis but was informed that government Pell Grants were being taken away from prisoners. Disappointed, I walked out the door.

Jobs at Folsom were difficult to come by, but I was eventually assigned to a tier-tender position. While most others were trapped on the main yard or in their cells, I was free to roam the housing unit. My freedom to move about brought me in contact with the wine makers. The lack of paying jobs prompted some people to develop a hustle. I knew about a dozen men who were proficient at turning water, sugar, oranges, and yeast into a fermented concoction that people were willing to pay for. Being an alcoholic, I was one of their customers, but the pruno was expensive, and I did not earn much sweeping the tiers, so I developed my own hustle. I began supplying sugar to the wine makers.

Dealing sugar to the wine makers became quite a lucrative business. I made a great deal of money and had unlimited access to pruno. Getting drunk provided me with short-term gratification and a means of escaping the reality of incarceration, but I could not alleviate all of the pain, and the bitter reality of prison cut me deeply. Day and night my thoughts remained on the bars, the walls, the fences and the razor wire that kept me segregated from society and everything I loved.

About two years into my sentence, I began to ponder the things that led to my crimes. My conditions grieved me, and I wanted to know what had brought me to the bottom of the pit. In my continued denial I searched for someone or something to blame for my sorrow, but in the end my finger was pointed at me.

I made a list of positive and negative traits I saw in myself and was stunned to see that the negative traits far outweighed the positives. I knew that in order to effect substantial change I would have to eliminate the negatives while adding to the positive traits. At the top of my negative list was alcohol.

I began to see alcohol in a different light. Where I once viewed alcohol as “cool,” I now looked upon it with great disdain. The old friend was now an enemy that had to be defeated. I had to stop drinking, and to stop drinking I had to completely separate myself from it, and that meant giving up my sugar business.

Addiction brings a lot of baggage to the life of the addict. Like the roots of a weed, the addict develops behavioral problems that stem from substance abuse. While I had at one time been close to my family, the need to hide my addiction caused me to withdraw from them. Lies were spun like a spider’s web to conceal my alcoholism.

During the period of my self-analysis, I began to recognize my immaturity and realized that it was not normal. At the beginning of my incarceration I spent most of my time lifting weights, watching television, and sleeping. Lethargy develops quickly and subtly in prison. Doing time tends to suck the life out of a man, and the prisoner finds himself entrenched in this lifestyle. It then becomes difficult to break the cycle.

I began to educate myself because prison officials forced it on me. I was assigned to a vocational program, which I completed eighteen months later. The success from this accomplishment was small but enough to open my eyes to things I could achieve if I applied myself. I liked the feeling of

accomplishment. More importantly, I felt good about myself for doing it, and I had not felt good about myself in a long time.

I took paralegal courses through correspondence and received a diploma. My self-esteem continued to increase, and I enrolled in self-help programming. The skills I learned helped me interact with others on a much more positive level. My quality of life improved. I enrolled in programs because I wanted to, not because I was told to. I wanted to learn. I needed to learn. I had a rapacious appetite for knowledge, and I understood what Bacon meant when he said, "Knowledge is power" (Bacon, 1957).

I have enrolled in college again through correspondence and have earned a bachelor's degree. I have completed the course work for my master's degree and have completed the rough draft of my thesis. I despised school when I was young. Following high school, I went to college but spent more time drinking than studying. In California, prison college programs were eliminated in 1992 once Pell Grants were taken from prisoners. Instead my family and I have to pay for my tuition.

In 2000, I transferred to New Hampshire via the Interstate Corrections Compact Agreement so I could be near family. New Hampshire had one of the few remaining college programs in the country, but in 2003 that program was eliminated, despite its great value.

There were few programs available in California, but when I got to New Hampshire, I was pleased to learn that there were many programs available for prisoners to take advantage of. Substance-abuse programming helps men learn the truth about drugs and alcohol and teaches the skills necessary to overcome addiction and remain clean and sober. Programs teach men parenting skills and aid in maintaining healthy marriages. Anger management teaches men how to control their anger and develop assertiveness skills so they can better interact with others.

I have taken these programs a step further by becoming a facilitator. I teach men how to use their own experiences to help others. The Self-Esteem Program helps others feel more confident about their own abilities.

In Alternatives to Violence, we teach men how to respond to people and events in a manner that brings a positive outcome for everyone involved.

Growing older has brought some changes I never would have anticipated. I grew up in the country and love the outdoors. I am at home on a ranch and think putting on a clean pair of cowboy boots equates to dressing up for the evening. However, my education has exposed me to culture that I had never

before had an interest in. I still enjoy listening to country music but find great enjoyment in classical. From classic artists like Hank Williams to the more contemporary sounds of Toby Keith and Shania Twain, the country sound takes me back to my younger years living far from the cacophony of the city. However, as I study or when I just want to relax and block out the endless noise of the prison around me, I listen to Brahms' Fourth Symphony. On many occasions this "voice" has been cathartic and has quieted my soul.

I have studied classical Greek art and truly appreciate the talent with which artists enrich our world. The humanities classes I took in college enlightened me to the world of art. Like the work of Brahms, sculptures elicited a response I had not expected.

I have discovered a talent for writing I never knew I had. I have harnessed the imagination of my youth and put it to work creating works of fiction. I have written several unpublished novels and screenplays. My dream is to one day read one of my own creations and watch the drama that was born in my imagination play out on the big screen.

I still watch television but frequently find nothing worth watching and turn instead to a good book. I enjoy serious literature rather than the pulp fiction I once read. I appreciate the quality and skill of writers such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Twain. I can truly relate to the character Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The meticulous analysis of the inner workings of the double murderer reflected my own personal anguish over my crimes and the victims I left behind. The turmoil of Raskolnikov's soul over his guilt paralleled my own conscience. The ultimate question posed in *The Brothers Karamazov* was one I had asked myself. If God does exist, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world? Dostoevsky offers no easy answer, but it is clear that suffering is inescapable.

Undoubtedly Dostoevsky's writings were greatly influenced by the years he spent in a Siberian prison. His psychological fiction reflects his profoundly religious philosophy. I can empathize with his feelings of being buried alive while in prison. The man who is ostracized from society suffers a fate, which so closely resembles death and burial.

Mark Twain was a genius at teaching his reader an important lesson in life but in a manner that was not at all obvious. *Tom Sawyer* was entertaining to read but brought me back to my own childhood in the country. His characters and the plots he subjected them to stirred up old, pleasant memories of yesterday that I long to recover but fear I never will.

More than thirteen years have passed since I committed my crime. When I was young, I learned too many lessons the hard way. I now prefer to take the path of less resistance. The teen with a youthful exuberance for adventure has mellowed, and the young man stung by alcoholism is now sober. I think of the young man who allowed his life to spiral out of control, and I want to take him by the wrist and direct his path. I grieve over the pain and suffering I have caused. I realize, however, that I cannot continue to look back but must press forward. There is no way to make amends for the wrong I have done, and the grief I have caused, but I can use the knowledge I have gained to help others. This middle-aged prisoner sees the youngsters walking through the gate and empathizes with their plight. As the years pass, I watch as men come, stay, then go. Too frequently they return a few months later. They go to the weight room, watch television, and sleep.

REFERENCES

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