

Time: A Convict's Perspective *Gregory J. McMaster*

This story was written with the hope that it will enlighten the public about the realities of *Time* spent behind prison bars.

Crime and punishment. Lock 'em up and throw away the key. Longer sentences and stiffer penalties. "Prison time and lots of it" is the cry heard across the land in response to society's never-ending stream of criminal perpetrators. Citizens are demanding more time while convicts are proclaiming they cannot do what they have already been given. With twenty consecutive years of a life sentence under my belt I understand prison time better than most and I have decided to add my voice to the fray.

Free world time and prison time run on two distinctly different clocks. Prisoners serve twenty-four hours a day, every day—no holidays, no sick leave, no vacations. On average, citizens do eight hour shifts five days per week. You have a home life while we are doing life. Tick tock, tick tock, around goes the clock. We see it, we hear it and with each movement of the little hand we understand that another hour of our lives has just been wasted. You mark your days and weeks by time; we mark our existence with it.

When I first entered prison I was in awe of the men who had served ten, fifteen, and twenty years. Looking around at the cold steel cages I found it incomprehensible that anyone could survive in that environment for such periods of time. Then I saw the cold steel in their eyes and understood—either you bend the steel with your mind or the steel bends you. Twenty years later the youngsters now ask me "How'd you do it man? How come you didn't go crazy?" Then they see the look in my eyes and a shiver runs down their spine. Something just walked over their grave; that part of my soul that did battle with the steel. Then I crack a cagey smile and tell them that I went crazy several times but somehow I managed to recover. Were you to walk me down any city street I could easily pick out the men that have done hard time just by looking in their eyes.

Prison time drags on forever. From wake up call in the morning to lights out at night you'd swear a week went by. Every week passes as slowly as a month and each month seems as if it were a year. Spiritually we age as if we were dogs with each year counting as seven. In dog time I have served 140 years. Many families are on their second and third pet since I became a caged entity.

Clichés come to mind. "Time flies when you're having fun." No one here is having fun and the time sure isn't flying. "Time is money." How true

in this instance; we're not making any and it's costing you plenty. "Time is on our side." It's the exact opposite, time is our immortal enemy. "If I could put time in a bottle." Just like time in a cage it would rot your soul. "Time is the snitch of the universe. It tells on everyone and everything." My original quotation from watching old-time cons roll over and snitch on their associates. "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time." Catchy phrase but no one, career criminals or average citizens who temporarily lose control, stops to consider the consequences of getting caught.

"Time stands still." Through massive sensory deprivation and almost a total lack of external stimuli time takes on a realm of nothingness. Everything is excruciatingly repetitive; always has been, always will be. Yesterday was the same as today and we have already done tomorrow. Xeroxed days and carbon-copy nights; seasons flicker by the window.

"There but for the Grace of God go I." Who hasn't committed a crime? Driven too fast or under the influence, experimented with marijuana, physically abused or assaulted someone, cheated on tax returns, hunted out of season, purchased bootlegged CDs or untaxed cigarettes or other merchandise from questionable sources, stolen from work, et cetera.

"Longer sentences and stiffer penalties." This sounds just dandy for law-abiding citizens until they or someone close to them gets nabbed for one of these innocent little capers. Suddenly their tune changes as they find themselves victimized by the very system they so stoutly supported. "But what about my family, my career, my life?" What about them? They mean nothing to "the system." If you're fortunate enough to have a dedicated family, they start serving their own kind of time; the closer the bond, the harder their time. Family members of the offender become victims on an equal and oftentimes worse scale than the family the crime was perpetrated against. I wish it wasn't so, but my observations conclude that the average family can only sustain two-to-three years of imprisonment before permanent damage is done. Bridges are burned and dramatic changes take place in the psyche, personality, and moral fiber of the incarcerated individual. Unquestionably prison causes damage, and the longer the sentence the greater the harm.

When discussing our now-disintegrated family, my sister flatly states that I only remember the bad times. She is correct in this assessment. The sterile environment of prison offers no sights, sounds, or smells that would remind me of the good times. No home movies, souvenirs, holiday get-

together, or unmonitored communication. There is literally nothing that would encourage favorable recollections. All around me is pain and suffering which triggers my memories of pain and suffering. Concrete, steel, and constant oppression aren't exactly positive memory catalysts.

My incarceration has spanned four decades; the late '70s, all of the '80s and '90s, and now I've entered the new millennium. At times it feels like I was sentenced to death and the Government conveniently forgot to execute me. Years go by without once tasting whole milk or real butter. The weekly food menu is fixed and never varies. The processed pap is tasteless and sparse. Mystery meat becomes a test of bravery while nourishing meals are restricted to television commercials and fantasies. If you can get past the smell you swallow it because it's the only restaurant in town.

Exactly what is twenty years? Proponents of longer sentences would have us believe that twenty years is an insignificant amount of time, a mere drop in the proverbial bucket. I beg to differ. Twenty autumns without a walk in the woods; twenty Mother's Days without a hug from her son; twenty Christmases without sharing the joy and excitement of children; twenty Thanksgivings without a family reunion. My family has spent the same twenty years attempting to cope with the fact that there *is* an empty spot at the table, that someone's missing. The guilt hammers home on each occasion as I recognize that my actions of twenty years ago are still causing tremendous pain and suffering. Twenty years of gut-wrenching guilt ain't no drop in the bucket. Within a year I will have literally spent half of my life in a cage. A milestone that I'm not looking forward to.

All time is relevant, whether it be one, thirteen or twenty years. A person's entire life can be destroyed from just one week of district jail time. He or she could lose their job, home, family, possessions, reputation, and future potential. Any one of these losses on their own constitutes untold cases of severe depression, nervous breakdowns, suicides, and murder. Long-term prisoners get the full package, all of the losses all of the time. Sam's wife stopped taking his calls; Bob's children don't understand; Keith's sister died and he's denied a special escort to the funeral; Mat's ex-fiancée just sold everything he owned. Time. We have time to get over it. Time to get ready for the next guaranteed bout of turmoil that's coming our way.

I notice time while dating letters. Another month come and gone, another page turned on the calendar, another year stockpiled. Convicts don't mark Xs on their calendars to count down how much time they have left. We mark calendars so we don't get lost—lost in our minds, lost in time. We are

the original time travelers. Without our little Xs on the calendar, Tuesday becomes Thursday and early June is actually late July.

When we show up disheveled for what we thought was a surprise visit, our visitor inquires why we aren't showered and shaved. "I told you I would be here Wednesday at two o'clock." Appointments for set days and specific times have no significance in our timeless timelines. Tick-tock, tick-tock, around goes the clock. We see it and we hear it but we rarely comprehend it.

Prison life offers many situations in which there are no calendars, clocks, or natural sunlight. Prisoners confined to the Segregation Punishment Unit learn to tell time by the Industry work whistle, meals, count, and lights out. Men in the hole are constantly asking each other "What day is it today?" Once given an answer a second question is routinely asked: "Are you sure?"

We identify the different seasons through the sports we play and the change in air temperature. There are no budding green springs or blazing fall colors. Correctional budgets don't include scenery. If there's snow on the ground and our ears are cold it's winter and if there's sun on our faces and we're sweating it's summer.

As a Boy Scout I used to be able to tell time by the sun, the moon and the stars. Now I only catch periodic glimpses of the sun, a rare look at the moon, and I can't remember the last time I saw the twinkling of a star. Starlight isn't capable of penetrating the megawatt halogen dayglow of prison perimeter lighting. How wondrous it would be to lay in a field and gaze into the star-filled sky. I would be eight years old again, lost in the mystery and beauty of our universe.

The passage of *Time*. I entered prison at the age of twenty-one, a violent, volatile youth who believed himself to be indestructible and eternal. Such is the folly of young men, particularly those of the criminal mindset. Having grown, matured, and survived the *insanity* of prison I now find myself middle-aged. After two knee surgeries, a reconstructed shoulder, chronic lower back problems, and arthritic joints I am all too aware of my mortality. Each day fresh faces enter the prison system, young men full of energy, hate, and confusion, just as I once was. Somewhere along the way I crossed over from being a player to becoming an observer; a wise old hound dog with energetic and unstable puppies snipping at my heels. On occasion I wonder if I was like that at their age? The other old-timers assure me that I was.

This observation brings us to the most important aspect of time: change. Since the age of thirty I have openly credited prison with having kept me alive long enough so that I could evolve into a sane and rational human being—quite a contrast from the twenty-one-year-old runaway train that desperately needed incarceration for the safety of society and protection from himself. The journey from chaos to reality was long, arduous, and constantly interrupted by the realities of prison. Personally, I believe I was ready to re-enter society ten years ago. Let's face it, if a man hasn't changed his way of thinking after ten straight years of incarceration he may never understand the self-evaluation process and work that needs to be done.

The other side of the coin is obvious; what happens to a man when he is kept past his optimum (caged) rehabilitative state of mind? Prison only offers so much and a person can only climb so high out of the sewer. When countless prisoners are kept past their optimum release date—the reality on a national scale—society runs the risk of losing these masses to the subculture of institutionalized criminality. Instead of releasing these men to halfway houses and treatment centers for further rehabilitation they are sent back into the depths of depravity and despair. Picture a drowning man breaking the water's surface and yelling for help while the rescuers on shore sip their beer, look at their watches and decide he's good for another eight hours. The analogy is the same except those hours extend into years.

When a prisoner clearly rises to the surface three basic criteria should be considered for further incarceration:

- 1) Public safety. Is the individual likely to re-offend?
- 2) Has the subject received the maximum benefit from programming?
- 3) Are there safe alternatives within the community that would further enhance rehabilitation efforts?

Instead of any of the above criteria, what we have is a *Time*-based system. In all too many cases prisoners are kept years and possibly the remainder of their lives past their optimum release dates. All too often, the reason is because a judge or legislated guideline threw a number into the mix. Although a judge's numerical sentence becomes the controlling factor in the length of time a prisoner ultimately serves, in most cases the judge wouldn't remember the offender, circumstances of the crime, or number of years meted out. When it's time to go it should be time to go. The individual should be out the

door, not held back because a number in a duty file dictates that eight more years need to be logged in.

There truly are prisoners who have changed, the ones whom time has had the desired effect upon. Ironically the biggest obstacle on the road to rehabilitation is the average citizen's concept of time. Although twenty years have passed in my own case, everyone insists on treating me as if it were still 1978 and I twenty-one years old. They are stuck in a time warp. Rehabilitation and developing a social conscience are never easy. The task becomes increasingly difficult when society as a whole seems to demand that an individual not change. It is quite clear that many of you need many of us to remain your demons and arch villains. I'm proud to say that quite a few of us can no longer fulfill those roles for you. Although you need us to remain the same we absolutely refuse. Time moves on and with time comes change. Many of us are no longer drug addicts, drunks, uneducated, self-destructive, thieves, users, and abusers. We were given time and we used that time to cleanse ourselves of the personal demons that led us astray.

Many of the issues raised in this story, such as ruined Thanksgiving holidays and tormented families are likewise suffered by the families of crime victims, particularly when the crime resulted in the loss of life. As I was writing I could hear the victims' families screaming out to me "What about us?" Having witnessed the torment of my own family and observed that of hundreds of others I am all too cognizant of their pain and anguish. Victims' stories have been covered in the media thousands of times; unfortunately, due to the state of our decaying society, they are a daily occurrence. Many of these stories tug at my heart and bring tears to my eyes, just as they do the average reader. This story is different. Its sole purpose is to educate you, the general public, about the meaning of incarcerated *Time*. It is one story contrasting the thousands. I'm not suggesting there should be a balance; just that we have a voice and it ought to be heard.

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