Remembering Prison Justice Day

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Kevin and I met while incarcerated within the confines of Drumheller Penitentiary. We worked in the same shop and lived in the same unit so it was natural that we became friends. This friendship was not instrumental or shallow in substance, but rather one of closeness like brothers share. The biggest fear we had in common was that of dying inside.

After our release, Kevin called me at the half-way house to tell me that he was in the Calgary lock-up and would I come to see him. Without hesitation, I went.

I arrived at the police station and met his mother and sister. After introductions and a few moments of idle conversation, I left, promising to return later. It was then that Kevin and I spoke to each other in that silent, universal language that only those who have suffered greatly can speak. His look told of the terror to come, our common fear of dying inside, and the degradation he must suffer. His eyes pleaded with me not to leave, but I did. I live with that look to this day, almost ten years later.

I returned to visit Kevin that same day, only to discover he had been transferred back to the penitentiary at Drumheller. From further inquiries, I learned that the authorities either could not or did want to deal with him so he was transferred again to Edmonton Maximum Institution. I heard later that Kevin was placed in solitary confinement — for reasons unknown — and he 'committed suicide', all this

because of a parole violation on a couple of years sentence for a crime against property. He was not charged with an offence when his parole was suspended. He was incarcerated for a technical violation of his parole condition. What an ungodly form of justice he received.

Thoughts of Kevin and others who met the same form of justice give rise to reflections on Prison Justice Day, August 10: what it meant to me then and what it means now.

At first, August 10 was nothing more than a day of protest for me. It was a day to shut down the prison for twenty-four hours and stay in the cell and fast. Each of us who remained in his cell was not credited with three days remission, which meant already 'overworked' classification officers had even more paperwork to do. I could also vent pent-up anger and frustration on those who did not join the protest. For me Prison Justice Day was nothing more than that.

On August 10, 1988, I was at a minimum security prison camp just outside Stony Mountain Penitentiary in Manitoba. We planned our usual fast and work stoppage, and included a memorial service for the evening at the prison gravesite.

As we gathered for the half-mile walk, I looked in the direction of the gravesite. The adage, 'out of sight, out of mind' certainly applied. The gravesite was tucked away in a far corner of the prison property. Unless you knew it was there, you would not know about it.

As I began to walk, there was a gentle rain. I became engulfed with unfamiliar emotions as my capacity to feel returned, overtaking strong defense mechanisms ingrained over years of incarceration. I began to feel sorrow, the pain of prisoners lost, the loss of Kevin. Names, faces all came into focus as did the deprivation of simple basic aspects of life I no longer knew. Most important, for me, the true meaning of Prison Justice Day became clear. It did not matter what others did or did not do. This was my day to grieve the way I wanted to, remembering those who died naturally or unnaturally while inside. The tears came, the rain increased; in the words of a dear friend, "God knows our suffering, and is crying with us."

I was appalled upon reaching the gravesite. It was littered with small identification plaques (about eight by ten inches) placed on the grass. These plaques had numbers on them identifying the persons beneath. As in life, so in death, the prisoner is denied even the most basic dignity. These plaques signify always that a person who dies inside will remain nothing more than a number on a small plaque on the ground. I became angry. Prison Justice Day now had spiritual meaning.

I was released to Ottawa the following year. As August 10 approached, I was contacted by Jocelyn, the wife of a prisoner serving a twenty-five year minimum life sentence. Together we organised a memorial service on Parliament Hill. People from all over the country were invited. A group from Montréal, people from Kingston, and as far away as Saskatchewan were there. Some of the men and staff from the local John Howard Society half-way house were there, too. And there was the mother of a prisoner from British Columbia who had died while inside.

Alice, this prisoner's mother, and I introduced ourselves. It was with great surprise, then total anguish when she said to me, "You were my son Kevin's only friend." As these words sunk in, it all came back to me; the lost look I saw in Kevin's eyes, his unspoken fear, the indignities, the inhumanity, the deprivation, the hatred.

I conducted the service on that day amid bursts of tears and sobbing. Somehow I managed to get through it although I do not know how. Throughout the next two days, tears filled my eyes, the anguish was that deep. Even as I write these words, tears come, for I think of the hardships we all suffer on the inside, but equally important, the hardships and suffering we go through once released to the outside.

Alice and I talked after the service. We cried together and even managed a small bit of laughter. We both needed that service to lay Kevin to rest in our minds. But we laid to rest more than Kevin. Many of the ghosts have now disappeared. I left a lot of crap on Parliament Hill that day.

Shortly after August 10, 1989, I set down a goal for myself. A goal of continued freedom. Only by remaining in the community

can I become a stronger individual and in some small way give meaning to the deaths that occur inside. Without doing this, I would most certainly be sucked into the hungry jowls of the justice system, digested and passed through it into a shallow grave like so many others. I would end up in a gravesite on some prison property with a numbered plaque on my grave, viewing the walls of an archaic penal institution that symbolizes a system which literally thrives on pain.