

## When Dreams Die *Charles Huckelbury*

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We cannot be what we recall,  
Nor dare we think on what we are.

George Gordon, Lord Byron

Depending on which poet or philosopher you read, old age can be a gentle, graduated slowing of physical and mental processes or a rapid descent into chronic pain and senility. Cicero tells us that life is a journey with death the destination. We should therefore shed our excess baggage the closer we get to the grave, accepting what is natural and refocusing our attention on a philosophical examination of what faces us. Move forward nearly 2000 years and we find Dylan Thomas urging us to “rage against the dying of the light” (Thomas, 1952). Nowhere are these two extremes more graphically illustrated than behind prison walls.

Even the most committed supporters of long-term imprisonment will acknowledge the inadequate and often nonexistent medical care in prisons, and I need not repeat the litany of faulty diagnoses, erroneous medications, and needless deaths that attend lengthy prison sentences. Instead, I want to address the psychological and emotional effects of growing old in prison, watching friends on the inside and outside die, coming to grips with one’s own mortality, and dying in a sterile environment, bereft of friends and family and condemned to desultory pain management by people who wish we would hurry up and die and get out of their way.

I entered prison as a young man of twenty-seven, unequivocally believing in a fatalistic philosophy that escalated between denying death’s inevitability and not giving a damn if I hit the Grim Reaper’s lottery. I lived in my personal Bushido, the ancient samurai code of honor that holds as one of its primary maxims that one day is as good as another to die. As I sit here now, two years away from my sixtieth birthday, I shake my head in wonder at how little I knew then. That time changes things, is commonplace, and so it has been for me. I have moved from a dark-haired young man with an endless summer in front of him to a white-haired member of the American Association of Retired People, eligible for senior-citizen discounts if I could use them. And as Wordsworth says, “oh, the difference to me.”

In my early prison years, geriatric prisoners were not yet segregated into their own facilities, so it wasn’t unusual to see graybeards sitting alone in the sun or else clustered together and exchanging stories. Few younger

prisoners noticed their decline, so when their time came to die, they simply disappeared into the black hole of the infirmary's terminal ward. No one gave them a second thought, except perhaps their aged friends who doubtless wondered when their time would come. In other words, dying of old age was what other people did, certainly not me.

That attitude, as prisoners know well, derives from a time dilation of sorts. No matter how long we serve, we remain mentally locked into the year we entered prison. If we come in young, our minds fly to Never Never Land and refuse to grow up. I remember the shock of getting pictures ten or fifteen years into my sentence of people I had not seen since my arrest. The graying hair, lined faces, stooping bodies stunned me because I still thought of those people in terms of Nixon's administration. After all, I still worked out daily and hadn't changed a bit, never mind what the mirror was telling me.

But a subtle process was at work, one that for me most clearly defines the aging process in prison and concomitantly marks the transformation from civilian to prisoner: the shifting of the dream structure. On entering prison, our dreams are those of free men and women. We dream of people, places, and things we recently left, finding consolation in the memories and a ray of hope for the future. Then, as the years slide into decades, the dreams gradually become prison oriented until we dream of nothing else, which denies the very existence of the world we left behind. We wake to discover that we dream of nothing else because, for long-term prisoners, there is nothing else.

Fortunately for humans, we tend to be an optimistic lot, our hopes spring eternal, in Pope's phrase, so that as we near the end of our sentences, we begin to examine our lives through the lens of real-world possibilities. For me, the process began after I had served thirty years and had just made parole.

In anticipation of my release, the prison reduced my security status and moved me into a facility outside the prison's walls. My work assignments reflected the need to move gradually from prison to the community, but most important, I was given the opportunity to volunteer my time on a fairgrounds maintenance crew. I leapt at the offer.

My years of denying the aging process abruptly confronted the rigors of manual labor. Empty fifty-five gallon drums that would have been toys for

me at twenty-seven now required both hands and a lot of back to get onto a trailer. More significantly, I discovered that three decades of imprisonment had not robbed me of my appreciation for life, only suppressed it.

Working in the real world brought me into contact with people who had no agenda. I saw couples and heard children's laughter. I felt wind in my face, and I touched trees. And I felt the ineffable longing for that one special person, my wife. In other words, I discovered by being in the world again that I had grown much older, much older, but along with that discovery came the realization that prison was an artificial construct designed to make me feel old, a tactic that failed miserably once I regained a standard of comparison. And, significantly, I began to dream about the real world again.

During this period of transformation I met Matthew, the eight-year-old son of one of the men who supervised my work at the fairgrounds. Matthew was a handful, a nonstop engine of movement and questions. He was everywhere we worked, doing his best to help and never treating us like pariahs. He made me feel young, and the prison years began to slip away. Until one day at lunch.

All of us ate together, usually outside on picnic tables. Doug and Debbie, Matthew's mom and dad, shared our table as well. On a hot August day, Matthew brought his plate and sat down across from me. He took a monster bite of cheeseburger, wiped ketchup from his chin, and looked at me while he chewed. Finally, he said, "You've been in prison a long time, haven't you?"

I sipped some water and nodded, "You bet, Matt, a long time."

Matthew was typically curious. "How long?" he asked.

I had to smile at that one. "So long you wouldn't believe it," I told him.

He thought about that for a few seconds and then asked, "Four years?"

Four years? I had that much time in the canteen line, but for an eight-year-old, four years was half his life and probably farther back than he could remember.

I put down my water and looked at Matthew. "I've been in prison for thirty years, Matt."

He stopped eating. "Thirty years?" he asked, struggling to comprehend my sentence that began when his parents were younger than he was. He frowned briefly and began, "How ...?" He never finished the question. He seemed to accept what I had told him and went back to the burger. I, however, had lost all desire to eat.

Looking across that table at Matthew brought home to me the magnitude of my loss. For thirty years, there had been no Matthews in my life, no Dougs or Debbies, no picnics in August, no thread of decency to connect me with my fellow travelers, only the long-suffering patience of a wife who waited for a husband who might never be able to hold her when the night turned cold. Matthew reminded me of what I had so carelessly thrown away but also what I was determined to get back. I returned to the prison each night with plans for the future: books to read, places to see, stories to write, and a marriage to cherish. Prison no longer invaded my sleep. I would be home just as the leaves began to turn.

Then, a week after my birthday, the Florida Parole Commission revoked my parole. Citing a minor disciplinary report from 1994 for missing a medical appointment, three people who had never seen me declared that my “history of institutional misconduct” was a predictor of future criminal behavior; therefore, my parole would be “incompatible with the welfare of society.” I was twenty-eight days from going home.

I am back behind the walls again, living in the world of the subjunctive, in which if-sentences describe the chiaroscuro hope that defies reality’s despotism. I have come to accept once more that hope is essentially meaningless in the irrational and absurd world of prison and parole, only “trivially operative where reward and punishment are determined by lottery” (Steiner, 2001). And where there is no hope, we age quickly, wither, and die.

The memories of my year in the world return to taunt me. The people, places, and events no longer seem real, as if they were mere creations of my dreams. Prison does that, extinguishing both optimism and morality if we aren’t careful to follow Andrei Sakharov’s advice to find the strength to keep on living and working (Sakharov, 1990).

Five more years will pass before I have another opportunity for parole, five more years of growing older and more pessimistic. I have already ceased dreaming about life, the real world beyond the walls. If sleep were the haven of Shakespeare’s plays, I would dream of trees and wind and smiling faces and my wife’s hand in mine while we shared our plans. But waiting for those dreams is as futile as the misplaced optimism of Beckett’s characters; Godot never arrived, and Vladimir and Estragon only grew older while they waited.

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## No Farewells

*Charles Huckelbury*

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One of the harshest things about prison, compared to the real world outside the walls, is the immediacy and totality of consequences for one's actions. In here, a careless or thoughtless word or gesture brings instant penalties. Out there in free society, by comparison, people speak without thinking; they become rude or belligerent, drive aggressively, and generally act without consideration simply because no one has ever called them to account. I worked in the bar business for a number of years before coming to prison, and I witnessed the same phenomenon there. Businessmen would come in after work to talk and have a drink or two, and once in a while, one would let his mouth get a little out of control, as if his authority in whatever office he just left carried over to a much less congenial environment. Usually, an appropriate word or two would settle the matter without events escalating, but periodically an object lesson would be in order. And for middle-aged guys whose last fight was in the fifth grade, the lessons were startling. Legitimate guys, defined as those who work for a living, just did not understand that there was a price for what they said and did. Most still do not get it.

So it was that I once watched one of our older prisoners here, another legitimate guy, pay the price for betraying a tenet of the code that reputedly unites us. Ray, at the time of this particular event, was around seventy; a frail shell of what once was a large and vigorous man. He had a neatly combed shock of white hair above a pasty complexion from too many years inside. Lumbar surgery had confined him to a wheelchair, which he navigated with some difficulty, until his final transfer to the infirmary. In the prison vernacular, Ray was harmless, having never fit into an environment that remained hostile and unknowable to him until the day he died.

His personal problems escalated just before he moved to the infirmary when he had problems with his cellmate over a matter of coffee that kept disappearing at odd times. After eliminating all other possibilities, Ray came to the logical conclusion that his cellmate was stealing from him. Rather than follow accepted procedure and either dealing with the matter personally or else enlisting the assistance of a friend, Ray opted for the most serious taboo in prison: he went to the security officers working in the unit for help and had the guy moved out of his cell.

The repercussions were immediate and poignant to behold. As is the way in prison, word quickly circulated among the other 239 men in the unit, and Ray was quickly ostracized. His erstwhile friends deserted him in droves,

verbally abused him for being a rat and administration stooge, and said they wanted nothing more to do with him.

Prior to the incident, Ray had several people who did small favors for him because of his invalid status. They brought his meals to his cell (he could not go to the dining room with the rest of us), pushed him outside so that he could catch the lowering sun in the afternoon, and tried to make his life as comfortable as possible. Now, no one collected Ray's meals for him from the Control Room, few people talked to him, and no one even held the door for him as he bumped and thumped his way in and out of the living area. Most men sat silently and watched his struggle to manipulate the heavy door without spilling his meal or tipping over in his wheelchair. By his singular act of betrayal, Ray had effectively isolated himself from most of the other men around him.

And that is the ironic part. Ray came from a staunchly legitimate background, one that had no relationship to the environment in which he subsequently found himself. He was a successful businessman and served his country honorably during the Korean War. He enjoyed all the benefits that class and privilege can bring and never gave a thought to prisons or the people in them. Then he ended up doing life for murder. The circumstances of his particular crime are not relevant for this essay; the point is that Ray came to prison when he was in his fifties, and he came with all those lawful preconceptions and prejudices that a legitimate life had kept in place. I did not talk politics with him, but I would expect him to have voted a straight Republican ticket. He was law and order all the way, and contrary to claims he periodically made, he had never fit in here; he had never been a convict. To make that transition would have required disabusing himself of GOP orthodoxy, and even interaction with the criminal-justice system could not accomplish that feat. Ray remained true to himself, which brings me back to the event under discussion.

Men and women on the street pay taxes and expect the police to intervene if they have problems. If someone steals from them, for example, they call the police. This is the way the system was designed to work, and it is the action that legitimate people *should* take. Ray thought like that on the outside and brought the same ideals into prison with him. He never lost them, and he preferentially identified with the men and women who guard us, those who work and pay taxes, rather than the men around him, those who had victimized him and criticized him for the principles he continued to hold.

So naturally when Ray thought someone had stolen something of his, he did what was completely natural: he went to the authorities for assistance. Unfortunately, Ray had never learned that what applies out there in the real world often has little bearing on what happens in here, but he could no more alter his behavior than a bird can refuse to fly. He knew the rules but ignored them because those atavistic tendencies were too powerful.

On a particular day around 11:00, Ray had wheeled himself down to the Control Room to wait for his meal being delivered from the kitchen. He parked near the wall and folded his hands in his lap. I watched him as he sat in his wheelchair beneath low skies that spit snow intermittently. Whoever was delivering his lunch to the unit made him wait twenty minutes, but Ray did not complain. He sat nearly perfectly still while the snow dusted him, his breath puffing lightly in the December air.

When the meal did arrive, tucked inside a Styrofoam container, he balanced it on his lap and began the arduous trip back to his cell, his jaw set, his eyes staring resolutely ahead. The sidewalk has a five-degree incline, but that is difficult to negotiate for a man with very little upper-body strength left. Still, Ray never complained. He pushed himself up that grade, moving the wheels on his chair maybe six inches at a time. He looked determinedly at the door twenty yards away, never expecting any assistance and receiving none. He finally reached the entrance to his quarters and struggled there for perhaps another twenty seconds until he finally opened the door and disappeared inside, doubtless to eat his meal in silence and solitude.

Where was I while Ray made the return trip? Thirty feet away watching. Yes, I watched the bit of drama unfold before me and did nothing. You see, I, too, was one with those who believed in a different standard, although I understood what prompted Ray to do what he did. Ray's behavior therefore neither surprised nor offended me. Indeed, how could anyone expect anything different from the man? Still, he had done enough time to know that enlisting the guards to solve an interpersonal problem was not the way to do business in here. I therefore joined those who preferred to watch Ray's silent struggle than do the humane thing and help him up the ramp.

We each lost a bit of ourselves, Ray and I, on that gloomy day, paying the price for what we believed in and the codes by which we lived. He depleted his meager physical resources during the long trip up the ramp, and I sacrificed a bit of humanity, probably more than I could afford, by refusing to help someone in distress. I could have walked over and pushed him back

to his door and provided a little companionship, and he could have asked for a little nudge, but we both held back; we played the roles assigned to us.

Ray died recently, but years from now I will carry that image of him, pulling and pushing himself up the ramp in the snow and me off to the side, leaning against the wall watching him. And I will always wonder what would have happened if one of us had made the gesture instead of allowing the moment to pass. Reconciliation was impossible, but perhaps we could have acknowledged our mutual humanity and in that way relieved the tyranny of what we both had to do.

## Death By Dominoes

*William Van Poyck*

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**W**hen the assassins come they kill everyone. That is what you must understand. Death is coming. It's at the door. Though uttered weeks earlier, on a different cellblock, I still recall leaning forward in concentration, struggling to hear the words, striving to discern the meaning, if any, conveyed by Wannamaker's frog-like voice. The old man didn't speak his words so much as he breathed them out, in a guttural rasp, as weak as a politician's promise, like a man talking reluctantly through a mouthful of marbles. Weeks later, perched on an overturned mop bucket wedged in the open doorway of my single-man cell, Wannamaker's enigmatic words were still gnawing along the margins of my mind. Those whispered words ... How was I to know they'd be so prescient?

It was on the eighteenth day after I'd arrived on the medical wing cellblock that I knew someone was going to die. I'm able to recall the number with confidence because I'd been counting each day like precious pearls, earnestly marking them off on my Salvation Army calendar, like a Chinaman working the emperor's abacus. After seventeen years in more or less maximum custody for a robbery so stupid I'm embarrassed to own up to it, I was finally on my way out.

*Seventeen years!* When you say it fast it doesn't sound like so long. Don't be fooled. Still, after seventeen coarse and caustic years that had sanded much of the grain off of my heart, after four presidents, five governors, and seven wardens, and almost two decades inhabiting a world of imagined threats and real danger, I couldn't think of a time I felt more alive. Finally, the end of despair was at hand for I'd telescoped down to just twenty-two days until my parole date.

*Twenty-two days!* When you say it fast it doesn't sound like so long. Don't be fooled. A lot can happen in twenty-two days. Wars have been fought, and lost, in less. And I was down to twenty-two days – so close that it made me scared – when life turned skinny on me. I fractured my foot on the handball court, stretching out to reach one of Peca's rocket serves. In a finger snap a Fiberglas cast was strangling not just my swollen ankle but was throttling the marrow from my nascent dreams. This joint has a lot of rules but suddenly only two of them mattered: Anyone with a cast must be transferred to the medical wing. And, nobody wearing a cast can be paroled. Yeah, I should have been on my regular cellblock, hanging out with the fellas and counting down my days in the time-honored chain gang

tradition. Shouldabeen. Instead I was squatting on a rusty mop bucket, forlornly inspecting my shiny cast, wondering which was the most pressing imperative: Cutting the cast off to make parole, then just four days away, or removing it simply to leave the wing and avoid the murder I knew was about to rock the cellblock? But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

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It was a quick, saffron sunrise and a pale champagne light angled in through my window, casting a ladder of cell bar shadows across the polished concrete floor. Outside, hemmed in by the tall double-fences topped by triple-strand concertina wire, the cooing pigeons strutted about, bobbing and weaving, cocking their heads, scratching around on the gravel-covered roofs. The maximum-security prison was a depraved place, a hermetic kingdom of the damned, haunted by its own terrible spirit. It was a hulking brute of a building, stout as a crusader fortress, whose puke-green paint miserably failed to soften its cruel edges. Constructed less of steel and stone than with ossified layers of malevolent history and vile memories, it was a marginalized slice off the bottom of society's loaf where half-made men spent their wounded lives chained to the past. I called it home.

I'd just made my first cup of coffee and stashed away my hot water bug. Staring up at my pitted steel ceiling, the mottled canvas upon which I was mentally painting my future life, my restless eyes marched back and forth, jumping, darting, to and fro, hypnotic as a metronome, compulsively counting the big, rusty rivets – sixteen up, sixteen down – parsing out my remaining days to hours to minutes to seconds. Submerged in a blissful daydream, I barely registered the shriek of the morning steam whistle signaling another round on the karmic daily grind – insightfully characterized by Keroauc as the Meet Wheel. I've learned a lot about Karmic cycles since that morning.

I was still negotiating with the buxom redheaded Mercedes-Benz saleswoman – damn, she was fine! – When a faint bustling commotion piqued my curiosity. Rising from my neatly made bunk, I reflexively yanked the skinny cord – just a long strip of torn cotton bed sheet – snapping on the naked bulb hanging from the ceiling. I slid open my solid steel door just in time to see a stranger drop his personal property onto the quarterdeck floor. He was medium height, old, lean, and angular, as spindly as one of those Giacometti sculptures I'd seen in the rolled-up *Arts and Antiques* magazine

propping open my cell window. With badger-gray hair and gingerbread skin, his lightly stubbled face was lined like the cracked mud in a dried riverbed. A ragged scar climbed like a briar from the corner of his mouth, past his temple, disappearing into white caterpillar eyebrows. An aquiline nose was silhouetted in relief, hinting at a patrician presence. His face was like a map of a leanly lived life, sketched with first-hand knowledge of suffering. Yet his lively blue eyes seemed to smile impishly. The prisoner stood with one foot resting upon a ragged, duct-taped cardboard box, while slung over his shoulder, à la Santa Claus, was a bulging bundle of property, tied up in a bed sheet. Wearing an incongruous loopy grin, he triumphantly surveyed the four-story, open-pit wing, like Christopher Columbus just disembarked from the Santa Maria to claim a new territory.

“Winky Wannamaker.” Startled, I turned to see my neighbor, Dilly, casually refilling his Harley-Davidson Zippo lighter from a small blue can of lighter fluid. “He’s a bug. Crazy as a coot,” Dilly explained, pointing his chin at the newcomer. “Been on Bug Row for years. I don’t know what the hell he’s doing in open population.” Dilly snapped his lighter closed then stared at me evenly. “He won’t last long.”

As I watched Dilly’s retreating back I considered his words. Bug Row, next to Death Row, was the given name for the wing housing the prison bugs—the terminally crazy guys—nominally a psychiatric wing, minus the psychiatrists, doctors, or nurses. Minus anyone who gave a damn. The bugs, some stripped naked, were confined in dirty, barren, burned-out cells, where they were given over to their most savage impulses, ranting, howling, and banging their bars, day and night, to the amusement of Lester Bibbs, the staggeringly amoral prisoner runaround permanently assigned to Bug Row.

A notorious informant possessing a muscular stupidity, unable to live in open pop, Lester left a wake of grief wherever he went. With hatred wafting from him like steam off a Clydesdale, Lester strutted the floors like a wannabe High Sheriff, Lester poked the bugs through the bars with sharpened broomsticks, knocking them upside their heads with brick-hard bars of lye state soap, bombarding them with crumpled up balls of flaming newspaper. Lester fed the ones he wanted to and used food to pit one bug against another, coaxing them to throw shit and piss on each other, encouraging others to give up and hang themselves. I won’t even describe what he did to the young and pretty ones. Lester’s morning ritual, conducted

under the observation of the grinning wing sergeant, was to don rubber hip boots, drag a fire hose down each floor and spray down those who grieved him most, particularly those he declared to be possessed by demons. I'd visited Bug Row several times when I worked on the plumbing squad, and I never left the wing without reflecting on how much I'd enjoy killing Lester Bibbs.

I turned back to see our wing officer point up in my direction, steering Wannamaker toward his new fourth-floor home. The only empty cell was directly across from me, off our quarterdeck, so I knew where he was headed. As I studied the sinewy old man trudging up the stairs, loaded down like a government mule, I realized that he was stronger than he looked. Though he wore a puckish expression there was a definite flintiness underlying his disheveled appearance, and he moved with a certain limberness as he crossed the fourth-floor quarterdeck he offered me a gummy smile and I nodded politely in return. When he stepped into his new cell I recalled hearing something about a Federal lawsuit, followed by some court order designed to change conditions on Bug Row. *Hell, they're just releasing the bugs out into pop*, I belatedly realized. *I hope they're medicated.*

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Imagine a small, rectangular four-story apartment building with each unit facing inwards onto an open, roofed courtyard. That's what the wings look like. There are one hundred twenty, one-man cells per wing, and fourteen wings. You do the math. Population wings have solid steel doors with small barred windows, as opposed to the barred doors on the max wings. It is fifty-two feet from the bottom floor up to the concrete ceiling spanning the open central pit. Each floor has catwalks running around the chasm, with a quarterdeck at one end. You get in a fight on the upper floors and you're always in danger of being thrown over the rail. It's something to think about.

I've seen guys tossed off the top floor with and without crimson knife slits puncturing their hides, and I've seen others voluntarily jump over the rails to avoid a knife-wielding attacker. In seventeen years I've witnessed every kind of murder: stabbed, speared, shot, strangled (manually and by garrote), poisoned, and bludgeoned. Mostly stabbed. For me, personally, the worst is by fire. Someone slips into your cell, fills your light bulb with gasoline or lighter fluid, and when you come in and yank your light cord a

vaporous, explosive fireball fills your cell, sucking the oxygen from your lungs and melting your flesh like cheap plastic. That's when you realize that someone has jammed your door closed behind you. Yeah, the fire's the worst. The inhuman screams go on and on until your failing heart reaches that point where you stop hoping that he will live and begin praying that he won't. There are things worse than death. You never forget those screams, and the smell, well, it never leaves that cell; I don't care how many times you paint it.

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I cannot explain why he began gravitating towards me. I was idly staring out through the dayroom window, mentally calculating the hours until my release date when I felt a presence behind me. Before I could fully turn I heard his gravelly voice.

"There is no being except in a mode of being."

I stared at Wannamaker, taking his measure, uncertain if he was addressing me. He stared back, smiling tightly, his cornflower-blue eyes twinkling with squirrely energy. "Huh?"

"Those birds," he replied, "are they real?"

I turned back toward the barred window. On the ground below a huddle of multi-hued pigeons were pecking at breadcrumbs thrown out by prisoners.

"They look real to me," I responded, wondering why I was even answering. I wasn't interested in making new friends. All I was thinking about was the streets.

"Don't you know?"

"They're real," I countered.

"We make our own reality," he said to my back. "You see what you expect to see. Open your eyes of perception and what is real will be limited only by your imagination."

"Really?" My skepticism was probably evident.

"All is Maya. Perception is creation."

"Maya, huh? Sounds like quantum physics to me," I remarked, turning back to face him, wondering where the conversation was going. He smiled back, a grizzled icon of Bug Row, grinning through broken teeth, and despite myself I smiled back.

"Ask and you shall receive. Knock and the door shall be opened for you. Whether you enter or not is up to you."

I nodded noncommittally. As the pigeons fed, we stood around, engaging in the type of small talk you make in the joint. At least I did. For his part the old man mostly spewed Delphic pronouncements. I did learn that he'd been in the joint for either twelve, fifteen, or twenty-one years, beginning with a two-year stretch for breaking into a church, which was extended repeatedly for a series of short-lived escapes. Now he was serving over seventy years. I also learned that he'd fought in Korea in the same Marine division as my Uncle Al. Wannamaker proved to be an endearing character, bubbling with cheerful illogic and unreason, his fevered mind conducting its own energetic symphony. But though his thinking may have been hidden behind an opaque curtain of seeming irrationality, his incessant stream of addled maxims contained just enough fragments of seemingly profound acuity as to cause a listener to hesitate, pausing to consider their possible meaning. Still, you didn't know if his words really meant anything because you had him pigeonholed in that place in your head where the crazy people are.

"Seek your own guru," he earnestly proclaimed, as he suddenly reached out towards me. I felt an odd buzz of something – energy? – When he lightly touched my shoulder.

"Invest your coin in the guru principle," he added, staring at me intently. His electric blue eyes burned strangely, shifting shades.

"I don't have any coin," I replied lamely, suddenly feeling awkward and unsure of myself.

"You must work on your Shakti."

"Shakti?"

"Power. Shakti. Shaktipat. Your power has been eroded since birth. Seek to rebuild it."

"How do I do that?" I asked, not really wanting to know.

"You need only meditate under the Wish-Fulfilling Tree."

"Why don't you just tell me," I argued, even as I wondered why I was continuing the conversation.

"You cannot learn music by worshipping at Mozart's tomb."

Not wanting to sound patronizing I chose to say nothing.

"That other bird," Wannamaker said nodding toward the window. "Is it real or not?"

Turning, I was surprised to see a handsome speckled owl standing amidst the pigeons. Amazingly, the mingling pigeons seemed oblivious to their mortal enemy. The owl slowly swiveled its ruffled head, left and right,

surveying the flock, its enormous eyes, all black and yellow, glittering like polished gems.

“Real,” I finally allowed, tiring of the old man’s dialogue. I was turning to leave when I felt his hand again touch my shoulder.

“Watch,” he suggested, directing my attention towards the ground. The feeding pigeons milled aimlessly, occasionally pausing to flap their wings or preen their feathers. Suddenly, the owl stiffened, then toppled over, as if struck dead by a hidden hand. I stared in astonishment. The owl lay on its side, motionless, as if frozen in time. The pigeons ignored the fallen owl. I stared at the owl for a full minute but it appeared to be rigor mortis dead.

“What” – I wondered aloud, turning to face Wannamaker. He inclined his head slightly, a gentle smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. My mind raced with the implications.

“Explode the secret and the truth shall rain upon your heart,” he said, squeezing my shoulder. He suddenly appeared very lucid. “Act now,” he added. “Even a saint cannot reclaim a wasted minute.” Then he pivoted and left the dayroom. It was around that time that I started taking notes.

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The next time I saw Winky Wannamaker was the following morning. He was sitting cross legged at the end of the wing, bare-chested, wearing shorts, with his back erect and eyes closed, going through some type of rapid, deep breathing routine that I figured had something to do with yoga. His breaths were long, deep and violent and a light sheen of sweat coated his lean torso. I was surprised he didn’t pass out from hyperventilation, like I used to do when I was a kid. Dilly wandered out of his cell carrying a cup of coffee and joined me at the rail.

“I told you he was a bug,” Dilly said motioning with his coffee mug. I didn’t reply.

Other prisoners were shooting Wannamaker strange looks, some smirking, others indifferent. When the old man finally stopped power breathing he began chanting a long, continuous one-syllable mantra. “Oooooommm. Oooooommm.” The chant resonated across the wing. More gawking prisoners lined the tiers, gazing up at the crazy man.

After a time Wannamaker stood up and stretched, oblivious to the curious spectators. Then, leaning forward he grabbed the top rail with both hands and with a perfect insouciance, he sprang up, quick as a cat and unfolded into a handstand. A solemn hush fell upon the wing as each of us, mouths agape,

digested the scene. Wannamaker was perched precariously on the top rail, locked into place with a white-knuckled grip, upside down, toes toward the ceiling, teetering on the edge of a four-story freefall. One errant move and he was certified dead. I watched intently, as if in a dream, as seconds ticked into minutes, and all I heard was the thump of my heart as I stood transfixed in that vertiginous moment. The old man remained perfectly perpendicular and ramrod straight, never wavering. No shake. No shimmy. No tremble. His taut skin rippled over corded muscles like braided ropes beneath old, polished leather. Everything about him exuded supreme confidence, as if he knew with absolute certainty that it was utterly impossible for him to fail. Nobody spoke the unasked question. *Who among us would dare such a feat?* It was magnificent.

“Yeah, he’s crazy,” Dilly, volunteered, draining his coffee.

But the truth, as usual, was more complicated. I didn’t see a crazy man. I saw a man who seemed mad simply because others could not hear his music.

\*

Over the next few days Wannamaker settled in, seemingly getting along with most everyone. My job in the library kept me off the wing most of the day, so I didn’t see him a lot. But, I got reports from others. Occasionally the old man engaged me in conversation, but usually it was just long enough to drop off a few nuggets of esoteric wisdom. “Deny the truth and you deny yourself,” he might proclaim. Or, “only power can handle power. To him who has it so shall it be given.” Once, he suddenly appeared in my doorway. “Perfect wholeness cannot be grasped,” he pontificated. “You must be grasped by it.”

“Huh?” I replied, lowering my *National Geographic*.

“To grasp you must be capable of being grasped.”

“That’s a tautology,” I countered after a moment’s consideration. But Wannamaker just grinned and skipped away.

In the space of a week, though, things got dicey. I was sitting on my bunk, flipping through a *Car and Driver*, admiring a lipstick red 1960 Ferrari 250 GT Berlinetta Lusso. I was just appreciating how the photographer’s lights emphasized the graceful swoop from stubby tail past clean flanks to the rising, powerful nose, when Dilly leaned through my open door and rapped his knuckles on the steel door frame.

“Your boy is bugging out,” he remarked, jerking his head toward the rear of the wing.

I stepped out onto the catwalk and peered over the rail to see Wannamaker, down on the bottom floor, marching back and forth in a rapid, herky-jerky cadence. He was butt-naked, except for a sheet tied around his neck, trailing behind him like Superman’s cape. I strained to make out the words that he was spitting out like machine gun bullets.

“Error-correction-error-correction-error ...”

I watched him march thirty feet, then spin around and retrace his steps, stomping and muttering like a wind-up toy.

“Error-correction-error-correction-error ...”

Several clots of scowling prisoners stood around, arms crossed, glaring at Wannamaker. “He’s been doing that for twenty minutes,” Dilly observed. “He’s off his medication.”

Later that evening I cornered Wannamaker and casually asked him what the naked marching was about.

“This place has a karmic deficit that must be balanced,” he barked. His eyes were unusually dark and glittered unnaturally. “Terra is speaking, if you will just listen. I must balance the karma.”

“Yeah, well, just be careful,” I replied, rubbing my jaw. “Parading around naked and talking shit isn’t cool. You’re going to piss people off.”

“An instrument for dispensing the fire of the gods must be a fiery instrument.” The old man turned and marched away before I could add anything.

The following afternoon after work I returned to find water streaming down the stairway, from the fourth floor to the main second-floor quarterdeck. A crew of angry housemen were mopping up the mess.

“That crazy old man barricaded himself in his cell and flooded out,” someone told me when I inquired.

“Did he go to jail?”

“Hell, no,” he snorted. Lieutenant came in and rapped with him, then told Sergeant Gates to let him be. If it’d been you or me, we woulda got our asses kicked. Stupid bastard’s still up there,” he said, jerking his thumb toward my floor.

Upstairs, my nose wrinkled at the acrid odor of burnt paper and the sour scent of urine. The quarterdeck was puddled with dirty water. I saw Wannamaker, disheveled and wild-eyed, his face smeared with soot and

blood, locked inside his darkened cell, staring out through the door's small barred window. He resembled a beast peering out of a cave. He was whimpering faintly. When I finally approached he growled ominously, then began barking in an unfriendly manner.

"Don't retard my progress!" he suddenly hissed, staring me down.

I hesitated, and then walked to my cell.

"Man, somebody's gonna kill that fool," Dilly opined. "He was stomping around the wing all day, waving a broken-off broomstick, kicking people's doors, barking at everyone. Real stupid shit." Dilly lit up a hand-rolled cigarette, then looked at me through a cloud of blue smoke. "He's paranoid. Claims everyone is plotting on him. Clown needs to go back to Bug Row. The wing officers see what's going on, but they're just letting it slide." Dilly looked around through hooded eyes. "I think they want some shit to jump off," he growled.

I looked over at Wannamaker's cell, saddened to see the dismal trajectory his life had assumed. With his splintered mind caught in a tightening vice he had two serious strikes against him for a convict – he was old *and* crazy. But his most fatal handicap was that he had no real friends. And, combined with an escalating overload of enemies there was a dreadful sense of toxic inevitability to the perilous glide path he was navigating.

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"I don't want to kill the old man," Octavio declared with grim earnestness. "Really." Those were his words, even as I watched him sitting on the white porcelain toilet, bent over in concentration as his busy hands strapped the knife to his calf with an elastic ace bandage. And I believed him, because I understood the circumstances, even as I understood why, in Octavio's mind, Wannamaker had to die. It was only two days after the old man had flooded out his cell and his delusional paranoia had metastasized into a full-blown psychotic breakdown. Incredibly, the guards had not locked him up, and the raw tension permeating the wing resonated like a plucked banjo string.

Wannamaker relentlessly stalked the fourth-floor quarterdeck like it was the Serengeti plains, sometimes armed with his broken-off broomstick, other times waving a razor blade melted on the end of a toothbrush. Muttering to himself, screaming at ghosts, he made feinting thrusts at all who walked by. No longer viewed as an amusing eccentric, he was now seen as a potential threat. Fear, like hate, tends to magnify perceptions,

and because maximum-security prisons are stocked with men who believe in preemptively eliminating threats before the threats eliminate them, Wannamaker's paranoid delusions had morphed into self-fulfilling prophecy. Now men really were plotting on him.

Moments earlier an incoherent Wannamaker, stick in one hand, razor in the other, had chased a startled Octavio out of the shower. As prickly as a strand of barbed wire, Octavio was a no-nonsense guy with a well-defined mean streak. Years before I'd seen him stab a guy in the gym over a perceived insult. When Octavio finally got out of solitary he tracked the guy down and stabbed him again. So, there I stood in Octavio's cell, propelled by a sense of urgency, desperately trying to convince him not to put Wannamaker down like a rabid dog. Octavio sat on his toilet, enveloped in sullen anger, his dark eyes snapping like semaphores.

"I'll tell you what," he finally muttered, after I'd marshaled my most persuasive arguments. "You get that son of a bitch off this wing and I'll let it slide. If I ever see him again I'm gonna cut him up."

I nodded and stepped out onto the catwalk wondering why I'd gotten involved. In twenty-two days I'd be walking out of that stinking joint a free man. But I've always been a sucker for lost causes. And the old man didn't deserve to die. I looked around, bereft of ideas. Wannamaker stood in front of his cell, staring at me oddly. Even then, in the midst of his madness, he possessed an inherent dignity, as though his disheveled, befuddled exterior concealed some fundamental cosmic truth. I wished desperately that he could read my mind and appreciate my benevolent intentions. As if on cue he bared his teeth and snarled at me, raising his stick menacingly. Suddenly, I had a quickening thought.

I strode down the catwalk to the quarterdeck, then ducked into the utility closet. Snatching a damp mop out of the rack I leaned it against the wall at an acute angle, then stomped it just above the mop head. The stout wooden handle snapped like a tree limb. I emerged with the mop handle raised overhead, swinging it like a cavalry saber. Without hesitation I charged Wannamaker, who faced me squarely. We crashed together violently, neither of us saying a word. Standing toe-to-toe we battled like gladiators. The only sound was our ragged breaths and the clattering of our swords as we beat each other relentlessly. Slowly, inexorably, strike-by-strike and blow-by-blow, I drove him backwards, until he was framed in his cell's open doorway. Then I bullrushed him, pushing him deep into his cell. When I stepped out I slid his door closed, automatically locking it. The only way

for him to get out was for a guard to come upstairs, open the panel and pull his cell's lever.

"I'm doing this for your own good," I gasped, struggling to catch my breath. Wannamaker stared at me through the door's barred window, his expression inscrutable. Then he dropped his stick and stepped forward.

"Are you worthy?" he breathed, in a hushed, gravely voice. "For the great and majestic tasks yet to come?"

"Look, you're gonna get killed."

He cut me off with a dismissive gesture. "I told you. Only power can handle power. Keep working on your Shakti; your power. Walk the path and the mighty power of Kundalini will rise and open the chakra jewels of your higher bodies."

"Look," I repeated, "You don't seem to understand. You're gonna get murdered."

Wannamaker cut me off again. His face suddenly relaxed and he smiled benignly, as though he was dealing with an especially obtuse pupil. "When the assassins come they kill everyone. That is what you must understand. Death is coming. It's at the door."

That was the last time I saw Winky Wannamaker on that wing. I turned and walked downstairs to confront the wing sergeant. "You've got to move Wannamaker off this wing," I said forcefully. "You all know he's crazy. He does not belong in pop. You are forcing someone to kill him, and he absolutely will be killed if he stays here." The sergeant didn't argue the point. "Yeah, we know. We'll take care of it," he replied, looking away.

I returned to my cell, feeling the tension drain away. Dilly was leaning on the rail. He raised his eyebrows as I passed him. "I'm going to the gym," I volunteered. "I think I'll get in a few games of handball." I was much relieved that the trouble was finally over.

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An hour later I was sprawled on the handball court clutching my broken foot. An hour after that I was wearing a cast and before the evening count I'd been transferred to the medical wing.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was one of those dense, vaguely unfulfilling short stories that draws attention to itself, where every erudite sentence appears written not so much

to advance a story line but rather as an exercise calculated to showcase the author's cleverness, the kind of borderline pretentious story you might expect to find in an overpriced, high brow literary journal, full of like stories, written and published by like people, a sort of self-congratulatory private club where they stand around, preening and posing, pointing at their glossy magazine, bragging that they'd been published. The kind of story you sorta wish you were clever enough to write, but were glad you didn't. When I finished reading it, I was left with the nagging impression that the writer had crafted what he believed was an exceptionally witty and well-written paragraph and had gone on from there, building outward in expanding concentric circles until he had a sufficient word count to call it a completion. Damn the plot, or even the point. It would have made a sophisticated literary editor proud.

"Well written," I offered, "but I missed the plot somewhere." I handed the pages back to Suzy Wong, the gossipy but engaging little brunette sissy living three cells down from me. Ever since I'd moved onto the medical wing, little plump-cheeked Suzy with the Ivory soap complexion had been eagerly pressing his stories upon me, seeking a measure of validation.

"Sometimes plots are a distraction," Suzy petulantly assured me, brushing his bangs from his kohl-traced eyes.

"Distraction from what?"

"The writing."

"I see."

I watched dreamy-eyed Suzy sashay away, another in the parade of sad stories and suffering souls filling the medical wing – a converted population wing of wheelchairs and walking canes serving as a dumping ground for those wounded bodies enduring the travails of modern prison health care. Now there's an oxymoron. The prison's detritus surrounded me: the blind, paralyzed, and feeble, but especially the dying. And die they did, almost daily, in wretched anonymity, from a smorgasbord of medical maladies, from full-blown AIDS, hepatitis C, cancer, Alzheimer's, and diseases I'd never heard of. They died alone and abandoned, thrashing around on their bunks, often gripped by excruciating pain – you do understand that pain medication is verboten in prisons? – infrequently attended to by indifferent med techs who seldom spoke English. They were all consigned to the bone heap. Suzy's trial by fire would soon be upon him, for he was being squeezed by the fist of Cushing's syndrome, a vexing disease that basically

makes you fat and weak, not a good thing in the joint. Moreover, he'd just been diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus, which, Suzy explained in layman's terms, meant that his immune system was relentlessly attacking his own body.

Settling back on my overturned mop bucket, my thoughts returned to the remaining four days separating me from freedom. I resumed the fantasy I'd been mentally playing out, before being interrupted by Suzy, visualizing a long dreamt about South Florida fishing trip, south of Chokoloskee, past the Rod & Gun Club in Everglades City, deep into the swaying expanse of emerald saw-grass prairies. I pictured the soft morning light blushing faint pink above my aluminum skiff as I meandered down a winding, tannin-stained creek, the mist-shrouded banks flanked by loblolly pines, stands of silvery cypress and, where the creek merged with the bay, tangled thickets of red mangrove, with their webs of gnarly roots and salt-crusting leaves. I saw the egret, the white ibis and green heron, and the roseate spoonbills, languidly lifting up from the shallows like ephemeral apparitions, rising puffs of strawberry and cream. I heard the buzz of summer insects, and the screech of the rare Everglades snail kite, skimming above the swamp, an elegant willowy-winged, tuxedo-black bird boasting an ivory patch above the tail. I saw the drifting alligators, the basking turtles, and the toothy gar hovering in tepid waters, and I smelled the rich, decaying muck permeating the sultry air. And out past the flats of the shallow bay, with aquamarine water glittering like crushed glass, stretching off towards the Keys, the Gulf was studded with sailboats; their pastel sails blooming like orchids from the cobalt blue sea. If I closed my eyes I could –

“Here,” Suzy commanded, handing me another sheaf of handwritten pages. “Read this one.”

I looked up ruefully. Before I could comment I absently focused on the hulking, bald-headed prisoner strolling across the bottom floor. It was Lester Bibbs. Upon moving to the medical wing I had been mildly surprised to learn that Lester, the infamous informant runaround, the cellblock tyrant and paragon of thuggery, had been transferred from Bug Row. Something about the Bug Row lawsuit. Now he was the runner on the medical wing.

“He's a beast,” Suzy announced for the hundredth time, following my gaze downstairs. Soon after meeting me Suzy had breathlessly chronicled Lester's rawest exploits. Predictably Lester was terrorizing with abandon. “You know the kid from Connecticut?” Suzy had asked me, referring to a

young, retarded guy on the bottom floor dying from Huntington's disease. "He goes in his cell and rapes him every night."

Before I could read Suzy's latest literary opus I heard the big, steel king door swing open and a prisoner toting a tattered, taped-up cardboard box of personal property stepped spryly onto the quarterdeck. To say I was surprised to see Winky Wannamaker would be a severe understatement. But there he was, as ragged and enigmatic as ever. He looked up to the third floor and we briefly locked eyes. When he offered up a spontaneous smile I reciprocated with honest affection. Not for the first time I vaguely sensed that somehow our lives were braided together. I watched silently as Wannamaker made his way to his new second-floor cell.

"Do you know him?" Suzy asked, his eyes narrowed.

"Yes," I replied, without elaboration.

"He lacks huggability," Suzy decided.

"He's a good man," I countered.

"I'm going to meet him," Suzy announced, plucking his story out of my hands. "I hope he's nice."

I sat on my overturned mop bucket, inspecting my cast – I had four days to lose it one way or another – lost in idle moments of reflection. When I looked up again Suzy was standing before me.

"He's in his cell doing yoga exercises, and chanting. He said he was raising the vibrations in the ethers around the earth." Suzy waved a sheet of paper. "I wrote it down," he added. "He said he's channeling spiritual energy into Mother Earth's psychic centers, into her chakras," he continued, consulting the paper. "He says he's here addressing Mother Earth's spiritual crisis. It has nothing to do with oil or gas or petroleum products." Suzy paused, cutting his eyes toward me, then continued reading. "He claims he's here to perform a crucial karmic manipulation and maintain the terrestrial balance." Suzy looked up skeptically. "What do you think?" he asked, chewing on his lower lip.

"Sounds like it would make a good short story," I replied without thinking. Just then Wannamaker stepped out of his cell. He was butt naked, wearing his cape, and holding something in his hand. Standing at the rail rigidly, his face contorted into an inscrutable mask, he began breathing deep and rhythmically – that yogic *Pranayama* stuff he'd once showed me – while intently staring down at the bottom floor. I searched his face, trying to discern his intentions. What I recognized was a volcano of rage, and with

laser-like intensity it was locked and focused upon a singular object: Lester Bibbs.

Things happened very quickly after that. With calm deliberateness Wannamaker reared back like a major league pitcher and slung a small black object downstairs. The whistling domino caught Lester on the side of his face with the suddenness of a pistol shot and surprisingly, lifted him up off his feet. He rose and pirouetted, like a cat stung by a bee, and came down shaking his head, a howl escaping through his clenched teeth, a hand pressed to his bleeding temple, his hooded eyes scanning the tiers. Their eyes met and locked. Lester dodged the second domino, but the third one smacked him on the bridge of the nose and a diaphanous curtain of crimson misted the air. The next one shattered a front tooth and Lester yelped like a kicked dog. Who knew dominoes could be so hazardous?

Lester ducked into his cell, emerging moments later with a shank in his hand and murder in his heart. He bounded up the stairs two at a time, a lion charging a lamb. Wannamaker turned and resolutely stood his ground, rock solid and utterly fearless, his cape hanging limply behind him. His profile, limned by a strange, luminous light, manifested an unmistakable aura of power, and suddenly I understood the meaning of *Shakti*. As Lester rushed down the catwalk everyone held his breath, and I offered up a silent, heartfelt Angelus for my odd and valiant friend.

At the last possible moment Wannamaker backed up, retreating into his cell. Without hesitation Lester barreled in, with the reckless confidence of Custer at the Little Bighorn. And it was in that brief nanosecond, that half a heartbeat between seeing and comprehending, just as Lester crashed into the old man in the rear of the cell, that I saw Wannamaker reach up and yank down on his light cord.

The sudden radiance, bright as a solar flare, momentarily blinded me. A deep, low *woooooomp* shook the air as an incandescent fireball filled Wannamaker's cell. I was standing now, seemingly outside of time, my heart caught on the steel hooks of reality. Shielding my face with my hand I strained to see through the billowing orange flames and roiling black smoke. I recognized Lester's blood-curdling screams even as the fug of lighter fluid and burnt flesh washed my face. Eventually the screams died away. The fire seemed to burn forever. Wannamaker never uttered a sound.

They found the bodies melted together with Lester wrapped up in Wannamaker's death grip. Now, sitting here on my mop bucket, I struggle

to make sense of it all. But the penitentiary is guided by its own peculiar values. Wannamaker was his own man, possessed of a many-sided courage, stubbornly persisting against the inevitable tides of fate. His was a life that had known suffering on a biblical scale, yet he was destined to never be free. Maybe it was really dirt simple. In a violent, structured realm devoid of choices a man can still select the manner of his death. And perhaps Suzy Wong had it right after all. Not every story has a clear plot or moral in its weave and sometimes the tale is simply in the telling.

William Van Poyck was transferred to Virginia's death row in 1999, following the death row murder of his co-defendant, Frank Valdes, allegedly by a group of prison guards. The guards were found not guilty. William (#274949) can be contacted at Sussex I State Prison, 24414 Musselwhite Drive, Waverly, VA 23891.

Prisons all over the country are trying to figure out how to deal with an aging prisoner population. Longer prison terms, the removal of good time credits, and more aggressive prosecution of old man crimes, like sexual assault, have put many more grandfathers behind bars in their golden years. Here at the New Hampshire State Prison, the population is aging as well. On sunny days the South Unit's exercise yard has so many guys in wheelchairs it looks like a retirement home. The line for medication call keeps getting longer. The white hairs will soon outnumber the rest, and this can make for some interesting problems. One old guy who lives in my unit had a stroke since coming to prison. He knows where he is, but doesn't know why he's here. He can't remember his crime. "I guess I must have done it," he says, shaking his head. Prison is hard time for the elderly. The strong prey on the weak; old men survive by hooking up with a younger prisoner who will look out for them. These friendships often come at a price.

"Charlie" is eighty-three years old. He's a tall man with a full head of white hair. He walks with a stiff, deliberate gait. It's partly the reserve and formality of his generation and partly arthritis with a touch of Parkinson's. I've heard that the state got Charlie's daughter to testify against him by promising nursing home quality care for her dad where he would get the treatment he needs. He's been in prison ever since. Charlie does his best to adapt. He seldom takes the slow walk to the chow hall for meals. He depends instead on food purchased in the canteen and prepared in his room. His life revolves around cell and dayroom; his associates don't extend much beyond his pod-mates.

Prison rules require that everyone's bed be made before 9:00 a.m. Failure to make your bed can result in a disciplinary write-up. An unmade bed is an invitation to the guards to shake down your house and go through all your stuff looking for contraband. Even someone with nothing to hide hates a shakedown. Guards tear apart your bed and pull everything out of your footlocker. For a young man, a shakedown is an annoyance. For an arthritic old man, it's a major event. It can take the rest of the day to recover some sense of order.

Charlie had trouble making his bed. He couldn't bend over enough to reach the far side. His fingers were stiff in the morning. He found a younger guy on his pod willing to make his bed each morning in exchange for an ice cream bar on canteen days. On the outside, the arrangement would have

been fine. In here, it's illegal. The prison wants to discourage gambling, drug deals, and the sale of sexual favors. All these things are sold through the barter of canteen items. Any exchange of canteen items between prisoners is an infraction of the rules.

Somehow Charlie's arrangement was discovered. He was called to the office and given a write-up. His punishment, five days in the hole, was suspended. It would be imposed if he re-offended. Like many old men, Charlie has a feisty streak. He dared them to put an 83-year-old in the hole. On canteen day he made a point to buy an ice cream bar and publicly gave it to his benefactor. I'd like to have heard the guards' discussion about how to handle the situation. Charlie called their bluff. They couldn't really make good on their threat to send him to the hole. What if he died there? Extra duty was out of the question. The guy can hardly walk. It wouldn't do any good to add disciplinary days to his minimum parole date. He is going to die in prison anyway. They called him to the office. He got another write-up. This time the punishment was 60 days loss of canteen privileges. Later that day Charlie was told to pack up his things. He was being moved to the infirmary, not as punishment, they said, but to evaluate whether he could continue to live in the general population.

I do not know whether Charlie will get to come back to the South Unit. After all, it is not a nursing home. That's what he really needs. I look around the yard and wonder how many beds they have in the infirmary. It looks to me like they are going to need add some pretty soon.

Phillip Horner is a first time contributor to the *JPP*. Phillip (#29992) is confined at New Hampshire State Prison and may be contacted at P.O. Box 14 Concord, NH 03302.

## Not Enough Compassion

*Donna Barton*

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**T**he 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.

Donna Barton is a first time contributor to the *JPP*. She is on parole after serving a total of seventeen years behind bars. She resides in Whitefield, NH.

## **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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## Time and Punishment

*J.R. Bass*

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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.

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## Sunshine Sketch of a Little Jail

Colin McGregor

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I am given a copy of a recent *Tempo*, the monthly publication of Brome Lake, a town a few miles from here. I have been in jail for 12 years. Such local publications are not usually made available to we denizens of *l'établissement Cowansville*. Reading *Tempo* in prison is an exercise in existential absurdity.

I study the articles and, especially, the ads. They reveal to me a world at my door I can only fantasize about. I am beckoned to purchase a set of antique lamps in West Bolton, wherever *that* is. A 'good humored' club in Bondville wants to teach me Spanish. Veterinarians compete for the honor of tending to my sick cats. Brome Lake thinks I should help pay for their medical response van. And there are houses, cottages, and quaint properties I can move into immediately, brokered by passport photos bearing beaming faces just a bit too eager.

I put down my *Tempo*. From where I sit I can see none of this world. I have dim memories of quick visits to this region while I was at McGill University, but that was a lifetime ago. It seems too good to be true. *Is it all really there?*

Afterwards I wander my tiny world. It is a brilliantly sunny, unseasonably warm October day. I walk a lap of the track that rims our little yard. I see the same objects that have greeted me for years: guard towers and barbed wire; electrified fences; a narrow roadway just beyond the fences; and on that roadway, modern police vans crawling at a snail's pace along the asphalt, their smoky windows concealing correctional officers toting loaded rifles at the ready.

Barely visible, miles beyond stands of tall trees ringing the roadway, can be seen elysian hills bathed in a riot of fall colours. Nothing else of the outside world makes itself visually known to me. We can hear sounds from a nearby highway and the occasional low rumble of a train, but that's it. I imagine that beneath and around the rainbow canopy covering these hills exist houses and farms, boats and roads, perhaps even quaint little country inns where tourists spend quiet, pleasant weekends with as little inkling that we exist as we have that they might be enjoying a walk through the woods or a good fondue supper. But the only signs of life I can actually see beyond my narrow domain are those relentless dark blue vans slowly, inexorably completing their orbits. These places in the *Tempo* must exist. The *Tempo* wouldn't lie. But that is a guess: for now, such signs of humanity

are just a dream in my head – just as they were once dreams in the heads of architects and town planners and settlers and farmers and entrepreneurs, dreams brought to fruition through toil and ingenuity. Everything starts as a dream. And in my thoughts they remain exactly that.

I return to the gray, drab concrete cellblock I call home. I go to my own 7x10 foot cell and leaf through my *Tempo* once again: 2.3 acres for sale just a few miles from here, only \$449,000, *I 'endroit ideal!* I can have my computer's mouse personally engraved in Knowlton. Steven will clear my trees for an indeterminate price. A man with a hydraulic hammer wishes me a Happy Thanksgiving. Someone who looks like Fish from *Barney Miller* will build a new community centre if only I will make him mayor. And there are many lovely spots where I can eat and even buy groceries (though I don't think the Knowlton IGA would appreciate the nationwide manhunt that would ensue were I to pop in to purchase a head of lettuce).

A uniformed man a few yards away silently presses a button from inside his plexiglassed enclosure. My cell door slides shut. With the cold thud of metal on metal I am locked in for the evening. My world becomes concentrated on the tiny glowing TV at the edge of my desk.

Then it strikes me. Yes, these things *must be*. The guards must sleep *somewhere*. And I recall a point of cross-reference. One afternoon while we were locked down – a search for moonshine 'brew' as I recall, though all these lockdowns feel the same – veteran local TV weatherman Don McGowan took me through the Townships during a televised travelogue. He showed me hills and pubs and a monastery inhabited by serious men who live in silence and make cheese or some such thing. He toured an English-language theatre named after a place where swine are kept – *perhaps a sop to area Francophones* – adjoining yet another pub – *are all the locals drunks?* He neglected to mention the jail, an understandable omission. We are well hidden. Perhaps he will catch us on a return trip. I know now that these *Tempo* places are corporeal. I grew up watching Don McGowan inform me about the next day's weather on Channel 12 in Montreal. Certainly Don McGowan wouldn't lie. *Cogito Brome est, ergo est.*

I think to myself, I am in the wrong place. I belong in my newfound *Tempo* realm. These are my people. The police set me up. Even CSCers were involved before my arrest. I am not insane. I have proof, documents, and eyewitnesses even. Surely those nice folks in that ad who want to board and groom my pet would understand? But nobody cares if I belong in jail

or not. Everyone behind bars has a sob story. I look at the pale blue and white cinderblocks that wall me in. *This is my place*. My eyes wander to the stained eggshell tile floors underneath my prison-issue cot. *You are home*; I say to myself, *this is your world*. The Lyon and the Walrus (another local business with an ad in the *Tempo*) might as well be on the moon running away with the dish and the runcible spoon for all the relevance they have to my piffling existence. Washington, Tokyo, Bolton, and Mars are all the same distance away. Except that at night I can see Mars: brilliant red, closer than in thousands of years, scaring the psychotic who wanders the prison grounds wondering when the flying saucer on fire might crash.

*This is hell*, Mephistopheles told Faust; *you are in it*.

I fall asleep, my sense of injustice and my notion of absurdity equally satiated, while watching that wonderful undersea documentary *SpongeBob SquarePants*. *October 2003*

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# RESPONSE

## Time Spent Doing Time

*Susan Nagelsen*

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I am waiting once again for visits to begin; this is my eleven hundred fiftieth in a series of visits that spans the last eleven years. I have watched a parade of humanity pass before my eyes. In many ways it has been akin to watching a full-length feature film, a saga if you will. Today is a typical day. It is Sunday, and it is 12:00, but I am sitting in the cold, orange, plastic chair even though I will not be admitted into the visiting room until 1:00. There is a ritual that must be followed, especially on Sundays. If you are not early, very early, you will not get in until the allotted time is half gone. On Sundays the room is filled to capacity, which translates into about two hundred people of all colors, shapes, sizes, and ages; most are from disadvantaged backgrounds, but as always there are people who represent both ends of the spectrum and all points in between. You can be guaranteed of two things: it will be loud and it never lacks for interest.

The eighties brought truth-in-sentencing, which brought mandatory sentences, accompanied by lengthy minimum sentences; consequently, the same people make the trek to the visiting room, and I have come to know them for that hour spent each Sunday waiting, passing time. I notice when someone isn't there, I listen to conversations, I learn about their lives and their children. I have seen them at their best and their worst, and they have shared with infinite patience and obvious understanding when I was at my best and at my worst. When tragedy strikes, there are hugs and tears and nods of understanding.

So, here I sit. It is January and the temperature is hovering around zero. The door opens, and I hear the woman next to me say, "Oh look, she had her baby." Karen has been visiting her husband here for five years, and we have sat together and talked through more Sundays than either of us wants to remember. Karen loves babies. Her son started visiting his father when he was just an eleven-year-old boy, and is now nineteen and at least six foot three. But through the years, we have heard about his struggles in school, his first date, his first car accident, and the protective nature of this boy-man as he tries to take care of his mother. While Karen is making noises about the baby, I can't help but think about how much her son has changed over the years.

I can remember the years of sitting there on a Sunday when Karen would bring her son along for a visit. In the beginning, they would sit apart from the group, for he was shy and this was new for him. As the years went along, he gained confidence and began to interact, at first just here and there, but now, oh what a difference.

All these years later, when this young man comes in for a visit, he is able to give as good as he gets. He has a great smile, and when he flashes that smile, his eyes light up, and in that moment we are all uplifted by his joy.

Karen's voice draws my attention, and I turn in my seat to see a young woman who is probably about twenty. She has barely made it through the door when three women, with oohs and ahs about the baby, a little girl named Tamatha, surround her. She is a little doll, and her mother is clearly very proud. The women help her with the baby seat, her diaper bag, and before too long, she is settled next to them with the baby, a blanket, a bottle, and a handkerchief filled with quarters. This baby is the newest addition to this collective.

These mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, lovers, friends, and children are doing time with the men they visit. When the clock finally ticks off the final seconds and the guards begin to call for visits, there is a collective sigh in the room. The cacophony begins in earnest. You can hear lockers slamming, quarters dropping, feet shuffling, and the children's voices are raised another octave, fighting to be heard.

There is one little voice that seems to be higher than the rest, "I want to see my abuelo," screams Mariel. The room is immediately silent. Then the smiles, then the voices begin. We have been waiting for her to speak for the longest time. She has been coming to this visiting room since before she was born, and we have watched her grow. We watched as her grandmother first carried her in her arms, and then came the stroller, and then the first tentative steps. Mariel went through the typical stages. At first, she would let anyone hold her, but at about eleven months, she only wanted her abuela. At two, she scowls at strangers, her eyebrows meeting in the middle; on some days, she slowly and cautiously warms up to the room filled with strangers.

We are laughing and smiling and talking. We are clapping and doing the "Isn't she the cutest thing" between ourselves. Her grandmother, a beautiful woman, with smooth café lechê skin and an engaging smile is clearly tickled to hear her granddaughter. It is a happy moment in a difficult place.

I hear my name called, and I head toward the bubble. Behind me I hear familiar voices speaking the mantra, "Have a good visit; see you next week." I walk toward the metal detector, stick my hand through the Plexiglas hole so the guard can stamp it. Then I wait for the door to the mantrap to buzz, and I walk to the front bubble.

"Hey, how ya doin today?" His voice is gravelly from smoking too many cigarettes. He is one of the guards who holds up the start of visits because he has to go have one last smoke before he is trapped in the bubble for the next three hours. I don't mind it when he is in the bubble; he doesn't care about anything. I smile to myself because it means it will be a low-key kind of visit.

"I'm hanging in there. Could I please have a table on the wall?"

I wait to see if my request will be granted. He will usually comply. You learn quickly who will and who won't.

"Table twenty-four," he says.

I smile my thanks and the door buzzes. This is great. I like this table. It is by a window; although the view is a cinder block courtyard filled with pigeons and rows of concertina and razor wire, there is natural light. I stand at the table and survey the room while I wait for my husband to walk through the door. I especially like this table because it is situated about half way between the front door and the door to the yard, up against the wall. We are offered, as a result of our fortunate table assignment, a panoramic view of the people whose lives are tangential to mine.

I look to see who is sitting on either side of us; it is an important thing to note. There are times when tempers flare, when private business becomes public business, and as anyone will tell you, forewarned is forearmed. The door from the yard opens, and men come through one after the other. I see many of the same men walk through the door each Sunday; they begin as a staggered column and fan out toward their visits. Some might nod as they walk by, and I find that I notice if someone isn't looking well, or if someone is not in the usual crowd.

My husband is third through the door, and he drops his pass in the specified place and strides toward me. His smile is there from the moment we make eye contact. His first question is always the same, "How are you?" Then we hug.

Once we are seated at the table, we begin to catch up. We never play cards, we never play games; we talk. We sometimes marvel at the people

who come in to the visiting room and barely acknowledge one another before they begin to play cards or Yahtzee and eat.

We spend time talking about my world, and then we spend time talking about his world, not the nature of prison, but the humans that occupy the space within the walls. So today he says, "You should see Felix; I have no idea when he will make it over here. The last time I saw him was when they cleared count, and he was still in his towel, primping in the bathroom. He is trying to make those gray hairs less visible."

"Have you seen his wife today?"

He scanned the room until his gaze stopped on Felix's wife. She is sitting at a table near the play area watching Mariel play in the play area. She has on a black winter skirt that comes to mid-calf. It has beautiful lines. Her boots are black calfskin and stop just below her knee. Her sweater is red and it hugs her body. She looks elegant, sitting there her hands clasped on the table in front of her, her legs crossed at the ankles.

"No wonder he works so hard. He must be scared to death that he might lose her. It's only been five, and he's got fifteen on the bottom."

"Check out Mariel over there in the play area."

"You've got to be kidding me," my husband says, shaking his head as he speaks.

"She is really turning into a little person."

Our conversation seems to go like that for a while. These people's lives intersect ours, so when things happen, we share them just as anyone would. One Sunday afternoon a couple of years ago, I noticed that a woman and her two kids weren't visiting that afternoon. When my husband sat down, I asked him about Tom. He shook his head.

"He died yesterday evening. I didn't even hear about it until this morning."

I wasn't surprised; it wasn't unexpected, but I felt a wide range of emotions surge through me. How sad. How sad that he died in prison. How sad that he couldn't be with his family. How sad for his children, and yet, how liberating for all of them. In many ways, he gave them the ultimate gift; they were all set free.

We had watched his decline. At first it was just little things; he started carrying a pillow to sit on; he had lost a lot of weight, and the chairs were hard on his back. His children, ages five and seven, then six and eight, then seven and nine, and finally nine and eleven, visited their father twice a week for as long as they could. When they were young, Tom was able to

lift them in the air and play with them. It was nice to see them happy. As his health failed they found more sedentary ways to enjoy one another. The children were at an age where they could understand the need for more contemplative time. They shared a faith that was strong, and at the end of each visit they would hold hands and pray, until finally it would be time for them to go. I had seen them just the week before, sitting there across the room. Tom looked very bad, but he smiled, and the kids gave him and his wife some time alone.

“Those kids really grew up fast, didn’t they? It will be odd not to see them here anymore.”

“I can only imagine how they must be feeling.”

We sat there in companionable silence for a bit, and then the sound of a crying infant entered the space.

“That must be Tamatha; she is only eight days old. You should see her, she is so tiny.” I knew that I was smiling from ear to ear. “There is something so sweet about newborn babies.”

The crying stopped as the new family made its way across the room; they were going to have pictures taken, the proud father stopping along the way to show off his baby girl. As they passed, I said to my husband, “Do you know him?”

“He’s been in the unit for a couple of months, but he isn’t doing much, maybe three, three and a half.”

They position themselves along the wall as their smiles are recorded for posterity, and then they make their way back to their assigned table.

On Sundays there is a steady stream of people moving up and back between the vending machine and the table, or from the table to the door. There is the constant sound of quarters dropping into slots and drink cans dropping with a thud at the bottom of the chute in the vending machine, and the buzzing of the door and the crackle of the guards’ radios, and all of this is competing with the sounds of laughter and anger and tears and joy. There are people who are only able to visit once a month, and when they show up it is like watching a series of mini-reunions as they make their way to a table in the back of the room. They nod to some and stop to shake hands and chat with others.

The door buzzes and pops indicating someone coming in the room. I recognize the woman, and even though I haven’t seen her for a while, she looks basically the same. There may be a few more gray hairs, or some extra pounds, but I would know her anywhere. I don’t recognize the young

woman walking with her. They head down the aisle and begin searching for the table. I can hear them saying to one another, "Table fifty-three," as if speaking it aloud will help them locate it. The young woman is much closer now, and I am shocked. This young woman is the daughter. The changes are amazing. She has gone from little girl to young woman. I don't know the woman well, only to nod and say hello, but I have heard her speaking to other women, so I know that her daughter is very busy with cheerleading, clubs, school, and she is a full-blown teenager who cannot be bothered with spending time with the family. She has gone the way of all teenagers, as she should. She visits maybe once every couple of months. I don't think I have seen her for nearly six months. I am absolutely amazed.

I can't help but think about the changes that happen while these husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters are locked behind bars. Of course we age; there is no doubt about it, but it isn't so clear to us. We are living it, and we are thankfully unable to clearly remember what it was like to bound out of bed after a couple of hours of sleep ready to face the day without a single ache. Our changes become invisible to us. Watching the children make their appearance as brand new tiny babies and realizing that in the blink of an eye you are staring into the eyes of a defiant fourteen year old is something to behold. It is in that moment that you realize just how quickly life changes.

It becomes a tableau. The world stops for just a moment, and I am allowed a moment to see it all unfold before me. I notice lines on faces, a slowness to a once jaunty gait, less hair on the heads, more hair on the ears, hands that shake and ears that strain to hear; there are babies crying, teenage girls sitting with their arms crossed and backs turned. A group of boys, ranging in age from four to six play with trucks on the floor. I hear a small boy yelling at the top of his lungs, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!" He is running full tilt toward a man who smiles from ear to ear as he opens his arms wide. He stoops and the boy leaps into his father's arms. All of these images and sounds present themselves for what they are: the texture of time spent doing time.

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## Years Mired In Thought

Mark Landry

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That there should one man die ignorant  
who had capacity for knowledge, this I call a tragedy.

Thomas Carlyle

**T**he central core of education, particularly in the prison environment, should not simply be the discovery and development of one's intellectual capabilities. Cultivating in students the ability to determine the surface area of a sphere, or the propensity to treat most indefinite pronouns in the singular form, or even the most basic reading skills, are all valid and extremely credible endeavors. There is, however, a goal far more important, particularly in a prison setting. I have encountered more than one psychopath in my journeys who could accurately articulate endless passages of great literature one moment, and then assault your senses with their delusional appetites for the unfathomable the next. No, education is about rational thought.

The role of acquired knowledge in changing preconceived ideas, or altering learned, destructive, and erratic behaviors, is not a novel concept floated for public consumption by some out-of-touch academic or social scientist. Thinking women and men have always grasped this truth whenever and wherever honesty prevails. Plato explained that once the fetters of ignorance are removed, it is absolutely critical to extend an opportunity for habituation; otherwise, the person simply flees from the light and returns to the shadows. Plato also understood the human resistance to change, something particularly repugnant to convict life, along with the probability that "the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the idea of good... and that anyone who is to act wisely in private and public must have caught sight of this.

Often the significant difference between the educated and the uneducated is the ability to employ informed rational thought at a crucial moment. Lawmakers and power brokers mistakenly believe they can legislate morality or that the threat of excessive incarceration is enough to deter individuals from engaging in a criminal act. The truth is they frighten only those citizens who in all probability would not commit a criminal act regardless of the government sanctions in place. The men and women today who fill our prisons to shameful capacity have in many cases developed a flawed thinking pattern. Six-time losers do not believe they will be captured

for criminal act number seven. Tunnel vision, coupled with the inability to rationalize behavior and reactions to a situation, permits them to focus solely upon the financial gain as it relates to their need for immediate self-gratification. They, we, cannot think rationally beyond that single-mindedness without the benefit of education.

The voices that lay claim to being representative of the people's will vigorously oppose the concept of prison education. The single greatest blow leveled at prison education came wrapped within a law preventing further convict access to Pell Grant money. The voices bemoaned the outrage of convicts being afforded entrance into America's colleges and universities at the expense of the children of law-abiding citizens. Facts and numbers were skewed, manipulated, and outright falsified to substantiate this fallacy and further enrage public sentiments.

These voices also claim it is time to take back our streets and neighborhoods, reclaim our lives, and ultimately live without fear of violence. No rational human being would argue these premises. I am always concerned for the safety and well-being of my family and friends I have left behind. But if you suppose for a moment that society has gained an advantage by removing a citizen from the community for years, perhaps decades, without extending an opportunity to access educational programming, then you are either foolish or seriously misinformed. How can you force prisoners to languish in the systems now employed across America, and then not anticipate their angry, bitter, violent and revenge-filled return? And what does the voice of the people say to his/her next victim? Nothing, because the government will not acknowledge responsibility for its duplicity.

Now, I am not suggesting for a moment that anyone is exempt from the personal responsibility for his or her own actions. Any suggestions to the contrary, and without delving into a big philosophical diatribe concerning moral and social responsibility or Old Testament postulates, suffice to say I adhere to the belief, "You reap what you sow." The issue that should be important to the public collectively is the blatant disregard so many individuals exhibit by breaking into a neighbor's home or assaulting a bank fully armed. How are destructive thought patterns altered to provoke a shift toward individual responsibility and empathy? It certainly is not through legislation or excessive incarceration. Perhaps if the women and men leaving our nation's prisons were given an opportunity to appreciate the truth behind their actions, recidivism could be reduced appreciably.

The truth that burglaries are the theft of possessions belonging to honest, hard working people, or that bank robberies terrorize sisters, mothers and grandmothers is not terribly difficult to fathom. Thinking women and men understand these truths as being self-evident.

Education has changed me. It has altered the way I react to situations, it has altered my view of society, and it has most assuredly altered my view of how and where I want to fit into that society. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending upon your perspective, my time of incarceration began when society either embraced the concept of prison education or was simply apathetic to its existence. Today I continue to maim and butcher the occasional constructed sentence, leaving my modifiers dangling and fragments littering the composed landscape like so much unfinished business. However, I can look back upon the years I spent studying and fully recognize how education has impacted the lives of those who took advantage when the opportunities were made available. Without question, the rate of recidivism decreases enormously as individual education increases. So why is the system frightened by the concept of educating the convicted? Keeping segments of society ignorant intentionally is an antiquated concept born out of fear. Every “lifer” or long-term convict I know who has been released after earning a post-secondary education remains free today. Education works.

How much do I miss the structured classroom setting? I stumbled into an English Composition class while serving a sentence at the Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, to escape the heat my behavior was attracting on the prison yard. I felt perhaps a little inconspicuousness might help distract the hounds that were chomping at my heels. It was in that first prison classroom where I became acquainted with the one person who would impact my adult life more profoundly than even my sentencing judge. Professor Jane Stock proved to be beyond my equal, as well as the influence I and so many thirsted after. She challenged, encouraged, chastised, and eventually ignited a passion for education in a most unlikely collection of students. Whites, Blacks, Mexicans, and Native Americans, men who would normally under the best conditions eye one another across the prison yard with suspicion and loathing, under the worst conditions stomp and stab one another, were now sitting in a classroom sharing a free flow of ideas and creativity. The magic never seemed to wane. A half dozen years later yet another influential professor pondered aloud in mid-sentence, “I

wonder how many prisons across America this evening are playing host to a gathering of minds contemplating Greek thought?"

I fully understand the concept of retribution. The notion of "Payback" is prevalent throughout every station of prison life. However, when an individual or collective group is exacting retribution it might serve their current and future purpose to consider this thought: "Do I want to antagonize my quarry, beat him down, humiliate him, dehumanize him for years on end, all the while knowing he will in all probability return to live amongst us once again?" As that member of society demanding payback, would you feel more satisfied knowing the convicted are spending that incarcerated time engaging in the same behaviors that brought them to prison in the first place, or would you feel more confident and justified knowing the convicted are serving that mandated sentence by spending time in the classroom exploring philosophy, mathematics, or computer science? I know what your primordial instincts lust for, but I also appreciate what your humanity should ultimately concede.

In recent months a sentencing judge was requested by the state to weigh in on a convict's bid for parole following twenty-seven years of continuous incarceration. The judge duly noted the man's impressive accomplishments by pompously acknowledging in part the educational achievements as being quite admirable. He then continued by pontificating on the reasons behind long-term incarceration. Prisons, he asserted, are a place of punishment, not a place to be educated.

With all due respect to this unnamed jurist he is greatly and sadly mistaken. Prisons should be exactly that, a place designed to educate. The system has served no purpose nor delivered to society any sense of justice by simply warehousing the convicted. We are a living testament to this *quid inconcussum* (unshakable certitude). Those who do not learn repeat history. There are those who insist it is easier for me to resort to violent, anti-social behavior by definition than it is for the average citizen simply because I have been there. I argue by that same premise, it is now easier for me to become a productive, contributing member of society than it is for the average convict. I have free will, I can think rationally, and I make my own, informed decisions.

Today I can solve quadratic equations, discover the tensile strength of a substance using the laws of physics, experience nineteenth-century London through the pen of Charles Dickens, and the oppressiveness of twentieth

century South African apartheid through the works of Nelson Mandela. I can appreciate the individual passions of Christians, Jews, and Muslims around the world and the wonderment of a carbon-based universe. But the one great thing of beauty I possess is the gift conveyed to me through caring, unselfish, and dedicated teachers and professors, and that is my ability to think and provoke rational thought within.

America, your prisons are not by any stretch of the imagination the refined country club settings political vote seekers profess. For many they are a nightmare, filled with violence that destroys the human soul. Remember America, "We reap what we sow."

Mark Landry, #18877, is 43 years old and has served 23 consecutive years of a life sentence. He entertained the parole commission for the first time in 2002 and was denied. He may be contacted at P.O. Box 14, Concord, NH 03302.

## Let Nature Take Its Course

*Susan Nagelsen and Charles Huckelbury*

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**I**t would be a gross injustice to have an issue of the *JPP* that deals with aging in prison and not spend time talking about those people who are living life on “the row” and would give all that they have to age and die in prison. The issue of capital punishment is not new to the United States; it has been rearing its ugly head since it was reinstated in 1976, and here we are in 2005 and still the machinery of death runs without regard to innocence or fair trial or proper representation.

As Stanley “Tookie” Williams made a final effort to see Christmas from California’s death row, the drama surrounding his attempt to avoid execution brought to mind the Seventies and Eighties in the Florida prison system when Florida was competing with Texas in the capital punishment sweepstakes. Back then, Florida State Prison’s Q-Wing was the death house with the electric chair on the bottom floor. Lethal injection has since supplanted electrocution as the preferred mode of killing, but most of the staff doubtless long for those halcyon days and the ritual of strapping the condemned man or woman into Old Sparky and watching while two thousand volts coursed through their bodies.

Take for example the case of Jesse Tafero, convicted of killing a state trooper who tried to search Tafero’s car at a rest stop. Tafero also killed a Canadian Mountie on vacation who was riding with the trooper. During electrocutions, a natural sponge, soaked in brine, was used as a conductor between the condemned prisoner’s shaved scalp and the electrode that was strapped to the head. Only natural sponges could withstand the extreme temperatures generated by the high voltage. When Tafero’s turn came, instead of using a natural sponge, one of the execution team drove down to the local 7-Eleven and bought a synthetic sponge, the kind normally used to clean kitchen counters. As soon as the executioner hit the switch to kill Tafero, the sponge smoked briefly and then caught fire. Witnesses described flames leaping from Tafero’s head and the stench of burning flesh that permeated the execution chamber. Not to worry, said the prison medical staff, Tafero was probably dead before he caught fire. Probably?

Prisoners locked down throughout the rest of the prison could always tell when an execution was in progress. The prison did not use its main power source for the chair because of the possibility of sabotage: someone could blow up the substation or sever a line and delay an execution. So the prison had its own generator to power up the chair. Most executions were scheduled for seven in the morning, and as the time approached, the power in the rest of the prison would wink off and on for about five seconds when the generator came on line. Everyone there knew that someone was about to die, especially when prisoners

had just seen the van carrying the witnesses approach from the administration building. Depending on how many jolts were required to kill the prisoner, the same blink of lights anywhere from ten to twenty minutes later when the main power source came back on verified that the man was dead.

As gruesome as the executions were, another disquieting part of the process came while the body of the dead prisoner was being loaded into the hearse. Depending on which side of the prison a prisoner lived, it was possible to see the van carrying all the witnesses leave the death house, drive back through the gate, and head back to the administration building. Once back at the administration building, however, the men and women who had just witnessed the execution were treated to coffee and pastries.

There is something positively gothic about thinking that witnesses to an event like that would have the slightest appetite for refreshments. Then again, humans have an enormous adaptive capability, so maybe seeing another human roasted to death is something a person learns to tolerate, like the smell of the ovens for those living downwind from Auschwitz. Moral ambiguity is to be expected from the guards who participate in executions, but to open a buffet immediately after killing someone seems *déclassé* at the least.

The point here is that Tookie Williams can not depend on public sympathy to save his life. The celebrities who rallied to this cause, the five Nobel Peace Prize nominations, and the series of children's books he wrote were as nothing compared to the political momentum behind his execution. He was convicted of four brutal murders, and he steadfastly maintained his innocence, which militated against any form of clemency, because everyone from the prosecutor to the Gubernator assumed his guilt. Without an expression of remorse, he remained to many a cold-hearted killer playing the system in an attempt to avoid execution, more so because he persistently refused to snitch on the internal mechanisms and membership of the Crips.

The question therefore devolves to an examination of the possibility for personal redemption: given the multiple tragedies of the murder victims, did William's contributions to anti-gang policies, via the children's books, and his public stance discouraging gang membership merit sparing his live so that he could continue such outreach programs? From Williams's point of view, history was not encouraging.

Recall the case of Karla Faye Tucker in Texas, convicted and sentenced to death for a single murder while she was under the influence of drugs. By all credible accounts, Tucker underwent a sincere religious conversion experience in prison, turned her life around, and went on to become a mentor and a spiritual

advisor to other women on death row, as well as the prison guards who worked that part of the prison. She freely admitted her role in the killing, apologized for the crime, and eventually gained international support. Even Pat Robertson, hardly a paragon of social tolerance, petitioned then-governor George W. Bush to commute her death sentence. Bush refused and allowed Tucker's execution to go forward, subsequently mocking her clemency petition to a journalist for *Vanity Fair*. If the criminal justice system in America will kill Karla Faye Tucker, it will kill anyone. Thus Tookie Williams.

Williams, like Tucker before him, was not asking to be freed from prison. He was instead requesting a commutation to life in prison without parole so that he could continue the work he had begun. In other words, Williams was petitioning to be allowed to die in prison but at a pace dictated by nature instead of the State of California. He exhausted all avenues of appeal; his only hope of staying alive was persuading Governor Schwarzenegger that his death would accomplish less than permitting him to live, no easy task considering the governor's recent election losses, his declining poll numbers, and his declared intent to run for reelection next year.<sup>1</sup> Executing Williams came to be seen in some quarters as a quasi-patriotic duty, and in most of his movies at least, the governor emerges as a superpatriot.

Recent indictments in Washington and confessions in California, however, appear to confirm Samuel Johnson's definition of patriotism as being the last refuge of the scoundrel. But Schwarzenegger has been remarkably maladroit in his political endeavors, which one had hoped would indicate a certain autonomy that could ignore the culture wars currently dividing the country. It is time for someone to step up and call it what it is: state sanctioned murder. Is there no room in the system for change? The United States should be a leader in the abolition of the death penalty, especially when not for the first time a state has admitted that it wrongfully executed a man as the result of snitch testimony. How can we allow this to happen? In the United Kingdom it only took one wrongful execution for the abolition of the death penalty, and we believe that the United States should follow suit. It is the right thing to do.

### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Tookie Williams was scheduled to be murdered by the state of California on December 13th, 2005 at 12:01 a.m. PT. Prison staff fumbled to find a suitable vein in his left arm to administer the lethal injection. It took 34 minutes before he was pronounced dead at 12:35 a.m. PT.











