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The Underground

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### THE IMPORTANCE OF PRISON

The public has the idea that inmates lives are nothing but a series of monotonous days, and events, of no importance. Most believe life is passing everybody in prison by. They think what we do has no gravitas, that our actions and relations have little or no weight.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The smallest act in prison is loaded with ominous potential. When incarcerated, everything is important. Inmates are hypersensitive to proper protocol. In here a nod can mean life or death.

'Friendship' is defined drastically different. In prison, a friend is not the guy you have a few drinks with or go fishing with once a year. He is responsible for your life. He keeps the cold breath of insanity off you with affections' warm embrace. In a place filled with the wildest true stories no one wants to hear, a friend listens to your groans about hang nails as if you are Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg address. How many friends in the world consistantly enquire about the status of the staples stocked on your shelf? Your pal in prison always asks what you need before he goes shopping. A convict is no fair weather friend. He knows that in the stormiest of times friendships are proven and cemented. We never feel so alive as when afforded the oppertunity to give it all for a friend. The importance of a prison friend can not be measured in 'street' terms. Here, where everything is considerably more consequential, being a friend carries substantially more significance.

Things are not less important, they are monumental. Alliances to sports teams devide inmates like warring religious sects. Good meals, rare as parole dates granted, are highlighted on menus weeks in advance. Politcs, race and religion fall under rules understood by all that brook no debate. Rules concerning these issues are always in the convicts mind. With a population so volitile, social land mines explode under careless toes with regularity. You 'get right' or get gone.

No one appreciates the small things more than the inmate. Two retired meteorologists, sitting on a front porch of a cabin in Yellowstone, chatting about the days beauty could not convey an inmates admiration for weather fair and foul. Making 18¢ per hour squeezes joy from \$10.00 Sit-coms are fine art.

Ink on paper satisfies attention needs better than the most orgasmic caress. Instant coffee delivers wet delight better than than the best bubbly. Cards and board games bond better than blood. Books bring more to inmates than to professors. Music dances in the inmates heart like a ballarina's dream. An hour visit from anyone in a prison visiting room outshines an audience with the Pope at Disneyland.

Every inmate endeavour is magnified in importance by the lens of outlaw mentality. A maximum security prison is not the place to get caught slipping. Heightened awareness brings into focus both the good and the bad. Prison presents itself to our pupils in a manner misunderstood. Our eye is a most primitive shutter mechanism attached to the most inspired computer. What is all around us to see, and what we see, matches when we choose. A round rock I own, because it looks like a friends face, has more value to me than the Hope diamond had to any queen. Rappers love their 'bling' less.

From a friend, to a pebble picked up on a prison yard, my world screams importance. Sometimes the worries of those on the streets seem silly. My wish for those in the world, who have everything, is that they find importance in nothing as I have. This adds significance to all things.

My world rocks, does yours?

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### PRISON PEN MAN

In every prison convicts know where to find the right guy for any job. There are people who clean and press clothes, some do custom tailoring. There are those who do legal work, and plenty who do illegal work. You can patronize the burrito guy, the two for one guy (borrow 1 pay 2) or the dope guy. As in the world we have everything from preachers to prostitutes.

I am the guy who writes. It should come as no surprize that the pace of pencil scratching going on in prison is furious. Everyone is trying to touch, and be touched by, some one on the outside by mail.

Here mail makes the man. In a place where junk mail is a welcomed symbol of connectedness, quality of mail determines quality of life. Mail is love. The cream of correspondence is regular mail.

Inmates respond vigorously to everything from love letters to mail marked 'resident'. Proper responses generate more mail so care is taken when answering anything. Some write better than others, some seek assistance.

In my attempt to addaquately respond to quality mail sent to me, I have become a writer. I feel I must practice writing dilligently. I must hone my skill as a scribe in order to sufficiently express how beautiful, to me, is the person who writes a convict. I hope assisting others will benefit my composing.

I write all manner of things. I have written, and illustrated, personalized childrens books for the kids of fellow inmates. (When Mommy met Daddy/Far away Daddy...etc.) I have written poems, songs and Hallmarkesque ditties too numerous to count. For love letters I listen carefully and dictate creatively. When putting pen to paper for business I practice succinctness. I avoid medical and legal issues. My favorite work is writing 'begs'.

The beg is any missive requesting anything. Asking for anything elicits dread in inmates. This is a delicate dance, where, a stepped on toe can be fatal. To solicit my hand to write your beg shows a seriousness of concern for that which you beg, and for those whom you beg from.

It is never the books or coffee denied that pains the inmate. Inmates know how to make do better than anyone. The fear of dropping one notch in the estimation of the most significant person alive generates, in the inmate, pain deeply rooted in ego.

The low self esteem ladder does not reach deep enough to qualify some inmates notions of self worth. The evolutionary trait that most aids inmates survival is the ability to not let every prison experience overwhelm you with its attempt to deny you value. We live in a world consciously constructed to deny love.

This seeps into our relations and turns normal transactions tricky. These doubts, about ones worth, cause more anxiety in the requesting than in the result. When we should be blooming in the sunshine of magnimity, we are shivering under clouds of uncertainty.

I believe people ask my help to gain some perspective. I always demand the truth. Sometimes running an idea by me, then seeing it written out simply, allows the requester an amount of objectivity that is lost when self composed.

As an exercise, I once wrote to my favorite living authors. I made them aware of my admiration. Two literary giants passed on to me the same advice. In different words both told me to forget about flowery speech and write of things I care deeply about. Beauty comes from conviction.

Nothing means more to an inmate than what he writes for, and to, his people. He is, always, not only trying to keep his connection to the world untarnished, he is trying improve it. With less than Shakespearian abilities and the institutions imposition of incertitude, some need help.

Inmates are able to list items they desire, but not that within that does not show, like the accompanying woe. Fortunately he is sending his requests to understanding people. The receivers virtue is already established by their prediliction to pen a pal in prison.

These good Samaritans set aside hyper hectic lives to join a world, and its inhabitants, most run scaming from. These are no novelty outlaw groupies. They are not thrilled with their weird prison connection, they abhor it. Next to prisoners they know the nightmare better than anyone. I contend that they gain much better returns on emotions, honestly earned in empathy for outcasts, than anyone ever

obtained from the current cult of celebrity worship. These are ordinary people in extra ordinary situations exhibiting exemplary grace.

That I might help facilitate good relations between such sinners and saints makes me feel I am enforcing the Constitutions prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. For the state to treat us any way it wishes has become its right. The psychological and emotional damage inflicted on us must be borne not only by us, but by those innocents who wear the hairsuit of compassion for us. I feel it is cruel and unusual to inflict such ugliness on such beauty.

I take being the guy who writes seriously. Lessening friction between the mail sender and receiver is my contribution and reward.

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### I DON'T MIND

Not minding got me a life sentence and I'm still not minding. "I don't mind" is a reason not an excuse.

At a Whitehouse dinner, J. Gordon Liddy held his palm over a candle flame until the other guests could smell his flesh cooking. When asked how he did it, he replied, "Ma'm, I don't mind." Not minding was not his excuse, it was the reason he could. My lack of minding excuses nothing but explains everything.

Money never motivated me so I mind it carelessly. I never minded having, or not having it. My never minding the traditional career ethic stems from my not minding money. I do not mind that I am afflicted with employment deficit disorder. I never minded punching anything but a clock.

When I used to box I was not amazingly fast. My power was below average. My strength was my tenacity, not a need to conquer. I never minded the odds, the obstacles or the opponent. I never minded pain. I never minded a little pleasure. To me fighting and fornicating just took testicles.

Intoxication is short term not minding on the cheap. A hero of mine taught me to not mind naturally. To be able to accept things, good and bad, and mind both equally is the trick.

Hearing an inmate say he does not mind a life sentence may be troubling to some people. If they have any compassion for the lifer, this should be the most welcomed response. For a convict to mind his life would be the same as anyone who's life seemed unacceptably troubling. I can think of nothing more tragic than anyone minding who, what or where they are.

## FABULOUS FREESTAFF

The canteen opened this month without its nuber one selling staple, Top Raman soup, in stock. Inventory had been completed the week before. How can anyone think this is acceptable managing? The canteen is consistantly out of the things inmates most purchase. This not only displays an inability to grasp the retail concept, it more tellingly illistrates the contempt held for the inmate consumer. For us it is take it or leave it.

Our canteen is the only store in town. Staff, in making this available to us, is obligated to see it opperates with some degree of proficiency. To not have soups and tortillas in stock is like opening your bar without beer.

Knowing what we want, being the only place we can shop, and then not caring enough to try to satisfy its only customers, is a flip of the middle finger to inmates. The freestaff responsible is doing the tax payers, who pay their salaries, a great diservice.

It seems this freestaffs cousins working in foodservice and laundry all went to the same business school for the rude. All the freestaff know they can do us any way they want. Worse than the sub par product and service, is, the 'screw you' manner they issue along with it.

A side effect of some medication I am on gives me problems with my feet. The laundry issued me shoes that did not fit. When I tried to exchange them I explained that the ill fit exasperated my podiatry problems. Miss Congeniality, who runs the laundry, screamed, "No shoes. You come back. 90 days " I guess shoes can only be obtained every 90 days. Trying to explain she had given me the wrong size, and, my medical issues compounded by the non fitting footwear was beyond futile... it was infuriating.

So I obtained copies of the pertinent data from my medical file. This I took to the head cop on duty and showed him it, allong with my shoes and the corresponding raw marks on my feet. The sargent had another c/o walk me to the laundy window where he told the freestaff his boss wanted her to rectify this.

She remembered me and in her horrible, pre-programed need to deny, blurted out, "No have his size!" I had never told her my size but that was good enough for the c/o. I walked back barefoot.

We have all dealt with freestaff who seem to relish antagonizing the inmate population. How many times have you heard, " Man he/she acts as if its coming out of his/her own pocket."

The state, in its wisdom, feels hiring incompetents is just not good enough. To be a freestaff one must be incompetent and discourteous.

## UNREAL TV

The current trend in television towards reality shows reflects some troubling tastes in the viewing public. When people tune in to "Who Wants To Boink My Sister?", they were not fans of romance. They are not expecting to see love bloom. They want to see the losers cry when cut. They want to see the contestants scheming and plotting villainously to sabotage the competition. No one tuned in to "Who wants to be like Mother Teresa?" They were too busy watching, "Who wants to be like the Crassest Commercialist?" In this gem, people, already wealthy, back stab each other for an hour leading up to the climatic moment when the vulgar billionaire crushes some ones dreams with the brilliant punch line, "Your fired."

We tune in to "Fool Factor" to see people eat baboon testicles. The shows where people are stuck in some isolated corner of the world, are no National Geographic specials. We do not enjoy the local flora and fauna, we get to see people deprived of all modern conveniences starve in filth. The meat and potatoes of these shows is the coniving calculation being wispered in the back room. The viewers are giddy with pleasure when Zack, the hunky chiropractor from Des Moines, forges an alliance with Peggy, the ditsy topless dancer, to win the "King of the kitchen" challenge...only to stab her in the beautiful back later. This is what people are chatting about around office water coolers.

The money shot of every "talent" show is right after some train weck of a performance, by an oblivious contestant of questionable mental abilities, is shot down in a hail of blistering criticism by some superior twerp with an accent. If the wreck is horrific enough, and the twerp crosses the acceptable pollitically correct insult line, the hapless contestant can parlay 15 minutes of fame into a weeks worth of tabloid fare.

Every reality show is a microscope for the population to view man being inhuman at the most basic level. Forget that this stuff is being produced, the real issue is peoples appetite for it. Where is the beauty in this art form? It is called "train wreck tv" because we look, but know we should not. All these shows have these text in or call in feature. You can text in your pick, vote or hope and try to "WIN 10,000.00!" Using the science of electronically induced greed, they have now placed slot machines in every household in high definition flat screen Zeniths. These shows are to mans artistic soul, what sugar is to teeth, a saccharine eroding agent.

If ugly is selling, why not bring the cameras into the Taj Mahal of hideousness? "Life in the Big House" would be the biggest rating bonanza in the history of the medium. Viewing numbers would make the Superbowl look like some Vega-Matic info-mercial.

To show prison with its warts and all, would profit everybody. Complete access to inmates, guards and the totally isolated world they inhabit, would fascinate. So many viewers would generate advertizing revenues so great, that even after the state and Hollywood took their

share of the profits, there would be millions left over to impliment new, foward looking rehabilitation techneques.

By allowing a crew to film everything from how contra-band is introduced into the facility, to an inmates parole day experience, entertainment, while being extremely enter-taining, can be socially responsible.

Light is the best disinfectant. Shining televisions bright lights into the dangerously dark world of prison may be the panacea for a terminally ill system. "Life in the Big House" would be a smash hit. It would entertain, inform and, hopefully, reform.

As the famous showman said, "Give 'em what they want." With the public demonstrating a desire to want to see man at his worst, I say...Come on in, let the show begin.

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### MASS EXODUS

For the first time in my life I walked out of a service before it was over. I am skeptical of most religious views but still listen respectfully. Surviving the droughts of faithmakes many more saints than the euphoria many converts experience when in the honeymoon stage of religious rebirth.

I attend mass, I always have and plan on continuing forever. I do not always feel it, but stick to my commitment. The ritualistic solemnity has always delivered to me something I find no where else. We do not go in for all that jumping, shouting, fire and brimstone stuff.

So when the priest did not show one day, I got stuck in a service that had all the trappings of a snake charmer revival. I walked.

The sermonizer was a recent convert to my denomination. While I am happy for any one who comes home to the mother church, I am not ok with lay people, still vibrating with converts zeal, issuing dogmatic edicts.

Calling others "pagans" seemed, not only politically incorect, but too polarizing. To build oneself up by tearing others down, belies the name and mission of my church.

I admit to being smug in my faith. I often think others superstitious rubes. I think them too literal, but I do admire the unnatural fire that lights up their lives. I will sit in on their services and feel the wonderful energy generated for/by spirit.

When any one demeans other people or their beliefs, I walk. If there is one thing I am sure of, it is, when this takes place in any church, God has left the building. So I do too.