

Among eloquent people I eat steak with my hands. Tonight is the Athletic club's annual dinner at the Oregon State Penitentiary. Inside the Salem prison there are eight culture and special interest clubs supervised by staff and managed by prisoners. This club is for incarcerated men involved in the various sporting events offered within the walls such as basketball, softball, running, soccer and volleyball. Each month the clubs offer a variety of activities such as leadership classes, talent shows, motivational speakers, and holiday celebrations. Once a year, the institution allows each club to have a dinner with one person from their visiting list inside the visiting room that barely fits 100-people. Along with inmate family and friends, each club has community supporters who attend.

All year long prisoners look forward to this two-hour evening of semi-normalcy involving friends, family and food. The meal comes from fast food restaurants capable of delivering a cheap abundance of greasy fried treats. For prisoners use to eating bland and undercooked food, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Izzy's pizza is a fantastic feast. Tonight there are buckets of macaroni and cheese, mashed potatoes, and too many pieces of bird to count. Most surprising, there are pieces of steak from unknown sources.

At the prison it is volunteers from the community that make club activities, religious services and college opportunities possible. The prison provides security and supervision staff but beyond that it's each club's responsibility to fund and organize their functions. They rely primarily on the support of outside community members who volunteer their time, efforts and resources.

Tonight, my wife Cheryl joins me for the meal. For her, the chance to sit side by side is the highlight of the evening. Typically visitors sit across from each other hunched over a small wooden table just below knee level while talking and eating \$2.00 vending machine donuts.

Tonight though Cheryl can occasionally lean the side of her body against mine as I chomp down a dinner roll slopped through gravy. It's nice to have both feminine and fried. Sitting across from us are Don and Martha Jones, a couple I respect and admire. Although it's difficult to recall how we met, I am sure that they are amongst my favorite people.

"How's the story coming along?" ask Don.

"I'm working on it," I mumble between bites of pineapple pizza. Clueless of the crumbs cascading down my shirt.

Last fall, Don and I decided to write stories illustrating various virtues from our different perspectives. He's a white 70-year old Christian doctor from the south with 4-kids, 8-grandkids and enough friends to fill a gymnasium. I'm a 41-year old non-religious mulatto also from the south with no kids, only a few close friends and have been incarcerated for twenty-five years. Since age sixteen.

"What'cha y'all writing about?" ask Martha in a southern accent reminding me of the grandmother who raised me. Don and Martha are club supporters who also attend church services at the prison. They remind me of a Bible verse in Hebrews instructing believers to visit those in prison as if they themselves had been in prison¹.

"It's about respect" Says Don who's barely touched his plate.

"I'm writing about why I respect religious people" I say turning to Martha. The topic has been on my mind since an encounter in the chapel six months prior. The prison offers an average of 200 religious services, events and activities a month for over sixty various faith groups and practices. Ranging from Buddhism and Vikings, to Muslims and Mormons. There are indigenous and earth based ceremonies as well as Jewish. It is the only place in the prison where people

¹ Hebrews 13:3

voluntarily go. The collective energy is that of people looking for a sense of the divine or who have already found it.

The prison allows specially trained community volunteers to provide spiritual care to prisoners. Seven days a week, three times a day, services are conducted in the Chapel's four rooms. I work there as a clerk responsible for calendaring, clerical duties and preparing the rooms for the various services that could included foot washing bins for the Seven Day Adventist, hauling out Yoga mats or setting up a baptismal.

The largest groups are always the weekend Christian services. This particular weekend one of the larger churches brought a first time guest from their community congregation. She appears to be in her mid-sixties with short grey hair, glasses, and toting a brown leather bound Bible in her hand. While setting up the room the new lady and I began conversing about the importance of spiritual balance and the necessity of kindness. In the middle of the conversation we heard Tim call out.

"Come on everybody lets pray," he said. Tim's the pastor of Calvary chapel. Their group along with inmates who arrive early to set up the musical equipment joins for prayer before the rest of the general population arrives for church. Their service averages 100 in attendance.

As the congregation heads to the center of the room I remain standing at the door. "Ain't you coming?" ask the lady.

"No."

The lady giggles. "Come on let's go pray" she says while gesturing towards the larger group who are staring at us as they wait for her.

"He's not a believer" calls out Linda. A regular attendant.

“Your not a believer?” she ask me in a voice barley above a whisper with a look of disbelief. Turning her head sideways and wrinkling up her eyebrows in obvious disapproval she speaks one more time.

“You seem like such a nice person, it’s a shame your not a believer” she says as turning to join her group in prayer. Leaving me in a state of ponder. While it’s not unusual for people to be surprised by a non-religious guy working in the chapel, there was something bothersome about her judgment that equated my lack of religious belief to shame.

Most days I engage in spiritual related talks because I enjoy faith inspired dialogue and truly respect religious people. Although I’m not religious, I respect those who live according to a faith that defines purpose in this life while providing belief in a heavenly afterlife. I often seek the counsel of people who live with higher ideals at the center of their lives and the fellowship I observe among their congregations is heartwarming. Often it makes me long for the days of my youth spent in the church. That sense of belonging and connection is good for the human spirit. As the group begins praying I turn and walk towards the office that has become my solace within prison’s chaos, yet, I can not forget the lady’s look of disbelief nor Linda’s simple four word explanation: “He’s not a believer.”

Over the next hour the words echo in my head, disrupting concentration as I ponder the statement and why it has disturbed me. I’m not religious because I have found no set of theological stories I believe in so wholly as to pattern my life after. Lessons of whale swallowed prophets and virgin births do not seem so absolute to me that I could adhere without question. My mind doesn’t allow me to comprehend a day and night existing before a sun and a moon as

told in Genesis². Whereas I don't declare it false or deny the possibility of divine design, I can not "just have faith" that is contrary to the way of the world as it's known today.

Above all else the concept of Trinity baffles me. While it's possible for one man to have three separate roles as a father, a son, and as a brother; I don't believe one could be his *own* father, both and son. Thus the concept of trinity is beyond my ability to believe so I can't profess to be Christian. But what if I believe in the lessons that Jesus taught?

Does the fact I'm not religious mean my belief of not judging so as to not be judged is less valid. Likewise, I believe it's important to forgive so as to be forgiven as taught in Luke³. Is recognizing each tree by its fruit only possible for those who believe a man returned from the dead? Hence I ponder whether it's the example Jesus sat for people that's most important to the church ladies or is it the dogmatic acceptance of the doctrine that's most important?

However, sitting across from the Jones, I understand why I respect those of devout faith. They inspire belief with how they treat people as if they see the lord's good in all of his creations. The encounter in the chapel months prior is suppose to be the basis of our shared story and Don has demonstrated only patience.

As I sat trying in vain to cut an overcooked steak with a flimsy plastic knife, I felt compelled to explain myself. To let him know I've been overwhelmed with learning the law and directing my own legal efforts. Studying seven to eight hours a day in order to actively assist a paid attorney, I then spend three to four more hours doing homework for a nearly complete bachelor degree. After homework, I prepare course material for one of three groups I facilitate for the prison's Restorative Justice program. Finally, to pay college and legal expenses, I spend a

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³Luke 6:37

couple of hours each night pouring over property listings and crunching numbers looking for deals within my anemic budget.

I want to explain to Mr. Jones how I push myself fourteen to fifteen hours a day towards goals and how the barriers, restraints and obstacles are exhausting. At times I struggle to keep hopes alive— yet they never cease to exist. At the end of most days, writing for leisure seems a luxury denied the weary and fatigued. Thus, I'm far too tired to do anything other than go to bed dreaming of a better day.

These are the things I want to tell him. But I won't. I can't. I respect him too much. Besides, he knows hard work. He's a successful man in work and family. A doctor, prior athlete, a dad, grandpa, and husband of 48 years. He knows hard work. He once told me a story of unloading freight boxcars for KCS railroad in the sun of a Louisiana summer to get through college. I don't want my excuses to sound like sniveling.

"I'm working on it" I say.

"What do you think the next topic should be?" Don asks. The plastic knife meant more for butter than steak wont cut. Determined not to waste the once a year treat, I grab it with my hands and rip into it with my teeth caveman style. Cheryl subtly wipes splattered steak sauce off her shoulder.

Don's already talking about the next story when I haven't finished the first. Who am I to tell my elder that I can't keep up. My resolve to finish the story strengthens. Before the night is over we agree that the next topic will be hope and as I go to bed that night I am hopeful that when I'm his age I'll inspire others as he's inspired me. Above all else I hope to finish this story before he finishes the next. With lifted spirits and slight heartburn I rest after thanking god for the presence of wonderful people in the world.