

*What Keeps Me Sane*

An industrial shipyard style bell rings at 5:15 every morning. The wake up bell is the first of 26 shrill rings through out the day that signal authorized and expected movements within the prison. The night's sleep is never comfortable; the steel bed frame is five and a half feet long and at 6'3" my ankles hang across the metal edge while my 200-pound body lays on a deteriorated foam mattress indented and worn thin from a decade of men.

The prison is never quiet. There's always noise. Think of machine factory decibels from steel doors slamming into steel doorframes and motorized gates wheeling open and shut while walkie-talkie radios crackle. Now imagine that these are the quiet hours. Add in the sounds of snores, farts and somebody's T.V. blaring and you have the best time to rest. Uncertain what the day will bring, as soon as I wake I inhale deeply, hold it and exhale.

Breathe.

Before all else, I find my breath and with gratitude for lung function, I begin a day in which dehumanization, violence, depravation and dysfunction will be the norm. Such as witnessing the mentally ill chase a senior around the cellblock with a crudely assembled knife.

Breathe.

Or, a correctional officer over asserting his authority on a newly arrived 17-year old kid sentenced to life without parole.

Breathe.

Perhaps I'll see teeth spray across the concrete again after a man's suicidal leap from the second story.

Breathe.

Today, some form of craziness is guaranteed. Decades of diminished existence in a place that replaces individuality with a state identification number.

Breathe.

Inhale a deep breath of happiness. It's a joy to exhale easily. I haven't always been capable of finding peace in oxygen, indeed, like many, I took breathing for granted until watching one man dying in a prison hospice choke up a piece of his esophagus in a struggle for breath while another man lay around the corner relying on a machine for breathing. My perspective has shifted.

The attitudes and psychosis of others don't clog my airwaves. Breathing means to be alive and thus with breathe comes opportunity.

Breathing keeps me sane.