

Fighting Empathy

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Two men trapped inside a six-by-nine foot cell: concrete floor, toilet, sink. Bed bunks and tabletop welded to the 1/8th inch steel wall, blunt edges, sharp corners. The space is so small that one man must sit or lie on the bed to allow the other movement. The iron barred door is locked.

“Shut the fuck up and get on your bunk. I’m sick of your shit,” yelled the older prisoner, a big, full-bearded white guy with all visible skin covered in tattoos.

“Hey man, don’t talk to me like that,” said the younger guy, determined to be assertive. He’s smaller and sports a thin mustache that looks like he just started growing facial hair. This cellblock, my cellblock, has five floors called “tiers,” forty cells to a tier. Two tiers have double-man cells. The guys are in a double cell below me. I can see them by standing and using the building’s outside windows to catch a reflection. But I don’t. I won’t. It’s not my business. One of prison’s main survival codes is to mind your own business. If it doesn’t directly involve you, then you pay it no mind. Still I can hear them.

“I’m about to stop talking and start beating your ass if you don’t shut up.”

“Dude what’s your problem?”

“You’re my fucking problem.”

Two days ago there was a riot between the whites and Mexican nationals, and the institution has been on lock down. Lock down means nobody leaves the cell. Officers pass out sack lunches containing two pieces of bread, a pack of peanut butter and a bag of chips usually smashed when passed through the bars. There’s no showers, visits, or phone calls. Body order and attitudes fill the air.

“I told you to shut your fucking mouth.”

POOM-POOM-THUD.

Punches have distinct and unmistakable sounds. Glancing blows sound like flesh smacking skin. They sound worse than they are. Solid blows landing with full impact connect to tissue with a deeper tone. A thud.

“FUCK.” I hear the younger one grunt. It’s clear who has the upper hand. I hear feet scuffle before the sound of bodies crashing into the wall shake my bunk. Vibrations reverberate across my back. I can feel their fight.

I’m flooded with adrenaline. When I was twelve I lived amid violence and domestic abuse in my grandpa’s house. That’s when I first began listening to people fighting through walls. By age thirteen I was living in the violent and criminally active households of my uncle. At age fourteen I joined a culture of street crime that glorified violence. Then in 1994, at 16, I committed a violent crime and was sent to prison. Here I have witnessed cruelty daily. Long ago I had learned to emotionally disconnect until I was desensitized to the violence around me. But the beating taking place below me is dredging up painful memories. So I don’t mind my own business. I use the windows to check out the reflection of the assault below, where I see a familiar scene: one man pinning another beneath him while punching his head and body.

POOM-POOM-THUD

And I remember my first cell fight. It was my first night in prison.

On August 30th, 1994 I was sentenced to life without parole. That’s when I was sent from the Benton County jail to the Oregon Department of Corrections Intake Center located in Wilsonville at the time. I was seventeen years old. The intake center is where prisoners were evaluated over a two-week period and then placed in one of the state’s other institutions. The building consisted of a long corridor with units branching off the main hall. I was processed,

given a bedroll containing two blankets, a set of sheets, and a rulebook and escorted to a unit where I was assigned a cell with an older white guy. The county jail had kept me isolated due to my age. This guy at the intake center would be my first cellmate.

“You got good paper work kid?” he asked even before I put down my bedroll. In convict code, if you have legal documentation proving you have not raped, molested or testified against a crime, it is said you have “good paperwork.”

“Yes,” I mumbled, handing him a large legal envelope containing my documents. Guys I met in the county jail with prison experience had told me to be prepared for this. But they hadn’t prepared me for what came next.

“What color are you?”

“I’m mulatto,” I told him.

As a kid, the issue of race was difficult for me. Although my mother was white, when parents in my Mesquite, Texas neighborhood told their kids not to play with coloreds, I was included. Yet, among the black families, I was a mixed kid who acted white. Once I asked momma what race I was, and she said both. A mulatto.

“What’s that?” he was clearly confused. I have a light complexion while my hair and speech are clearly ethnic. I’m frequently asked what I am.

“Half black, half white,” I told him.

“You can’t stay. I only cell up with white dudes.”

“Ok, how do I move?”

“Press the button,” he said. “Tell’em you have to leave.” The cell had an intercom button that could call the officers in the control center. But I had been schooled in four months at the county jail that under no circumstances was a prisoner to ever involve officers in anything

between prisoners. I had to stand up and face whatever situation on my own. In addition to not snitching, I had been warned against backing down from any challenge.

“I’m not pressing the button.” My statement was firm. My voice was weak.

“If you’re in here at lock in, I’m going to hurt you.” He stormed out the door. I didn’t know what to do. I sat there, terrified. Four hours later, “lock in” came the announcement over the cellblock intercoms, and my cellmate returned. I got a closer look at him: long, scraggly dirty blond hair, unshaven, missing teeth -- maybe from drug use, maybe from fighting. He had “HATE” tattooed across his knuckles, a swastika was tattooed on his neck.

“You going to leave?” he asked.

“I can’t.”

He sat down on his bunk. It seemed to be a reprieve. Perhaps I already passed the test, and he would leave me alone since I stood my ground? What I didn’t know then was that correctional institutions have multiple count times, day and night, to tally the imprisoned. Officers go cell to cell counting prisoners to make sure the numbers are correct. As soon as the officer walked by, my cellmate stood up and turned to where I was leaning against the sink.

“Push the button,” he ordered.

“No.”

Suddenly it seemed like lightning hit my eye, then again and again. Before I realized it he had hit me three times, I swung back aimlessly, falling in the space between the sink and the bunk where I couldn’t move away from him. He rained down punches, I couldn’t breathe or wiggle free. He stopped and stood over me. Breathing heavy.

“Press the button.”

Jumping up, dizzy, gasping for air and bleeding from a busted lip and a cut above my eye. I responded with dread. "I can't."

He hit me again. I tried to fight back, but I was down on the floor, once again under his control. When it comes to grappling, pushing and punching in a confined space, the heavier, stronger man has the advantage. I was then a skinny kid, 6'2" 162-pounds. He had the muscle, He had the weight. He beat me three times that night. He beat me until he got tired. Had he wanted to kill me I would be dead.

Neither of us slept that night. He laid awake reading. I sat on my bunk, injured, panicked by his every move. The doors opened for breakfast, and before I left he warned, "If you come back in here again I'm going to send you to the hospital."

I left to go find a weapon.

Shortly after breakfast I was approached by a stocky black prisoner who stood close to six feet tall with a short afro and close-cropped goatee. He introduced himself as Top-Rock and told me he in was in the cell next door and wanted to know why we were fighting. After that I guess Top-Rock went and spoke with both black and white prisoners in the unit. I don't know what was said but shortly after the breakfast trays were picked up, Top-Rock went into the cell and attacked the guy who had punched me around all night. Ironically, the HATE-knuckled guy violated the prisoners' code, pressed the intercom button and got transferred to another cell. In the prison culture, I gained "respect" from the rest of the unit for standing my ground, and the other guy lost respect for breaking the code.

That was twenty years ago, and sadly the rules and codes remain the same. The guy below me is being beaten for not backing down. I listen, and I remember the helplessness, the terror. I listen and I remember seeing the body of my grandpa's second wife hitting the floor in

the living room. I stifled my tears. Thirteen was too old to cry. I listen and remember street scenes, violent street scenes. Here in prison we commit violence towards each other, adhering to codes that perpetuate disempowerment. We undermine our collective potential with destructive behaviors we confuse for strength. This hurting of another human being—a stranger, none of my business -- bothered me.

The fighting below me stops. I try to return to 'normal' and push the fight and memories from my mind. But I can't. I feel connected to the guy below me. He won't sleep tonight and he won't turn to the cops out of principle, and he will suffer because he can't think of any other way to resolve it.

Cell fights are so common that, at least for the last decade, they stopped registering as an event in my mind. Cruelty had become my accepted reality. Yet, I can't seem to push this one from my thoughts. My breath quickens. I try to choke back tears. Crying is not something you do in prison. Here the only socially acceptable emotions are anger and frustration. I thought about the last time I allowed myself to cry. It had been years. I began sobbing. I could think of no reason why I was experiencing any sensitivity now. I'd seen men knocked unconscious by other prisoners and passed by without offering aid. I'd seen officers slam old men to the concrete and did not intervene.

Just the way it is, the prisoner mantra goes.

The young man in the cell below was concerned about living through the night. I was concerned about my sanity. I have watched people's mental health snap in what seemed to be an instant. I remember Christopher, a college student prior to prison who was smart and engaging and seemed to be doing better than most when he first arrived. His beautiful brunette girlfriend rode her bike to visit him daily, and his family came often. His interests were philosophy and

economics. He was a tutor in my college class until the angels began speaking to him so incessantly that he banged his head into a bloody mess on the cell wall.

If my sanity snapped, and I broke down over cruelties witnessed in here. I would never stop weeping. The sense of helplessness would enslave me in an environment whose roughness rubs tender spots raw. This place isn't safe for emotional sensitivity.

I considered intervening on the new guy's behalf the way Top-Rock had for me. But I had vowed years ago to live my life in amends and avoid causing any further harm. Two days passed without incident, the lock down ended, and things returned to the routine absurdness considered "normal." But I didn't go back to normal. Questions regarding my sanity plagued me. Anxiety was starting to swell as I kept finding myself emotionally rocked by things I would normally ignore, like people ridiculing handicaps, or the crying departures of kids leaving the visiting room. But the day I got choked up over a Canadian goose entangled in the razor wire I knew I needed help.

While the prison itself is inherently unsafe, there are spaces offering support through various programs, services, and activities. There are writers groups, twelve step programs, support circles, group therapies, classes and religious events. These spaces provide fellowship and support from peers also seeking personal growth and a sense of community. I joined a trauma transformation group that explored the dynamics of trauma while celebrating human resilience and intrinsic health. For eighteen month, we, six men, created a space that disrupted the prison's habitual numbness and routine. And I discovered that the heightened sensitivity I was experiencing was actually a sign of recovery, a re-sensitization that indicated I had healed enough from previous traumas that I no longer disconnected from my feelings. My earliest responses to trauma had been to walling off my feelings. But I had spent the last decade repairing

and establishing close relationships in my personal life that restored my emotional health and sense of connection.

Coming to realize that feelings are what make me human, I began celebrating those emotions. I began writing poetry, essays, and plays. I volunteered to help sick prisoners and tutor students. Understanding I have agency and can use my voice in advocacy, I began speaking non-violence among violent friends, questioning the norms of destruction, asking why prisoners fight over crumbs instead of preparing to benefit our families and communities.

I don't know what ever became of the men who were fighting, but I now know it's possible for events that initially seem overwhelming to become the catalyst for personal growth, recovery and evolution. I now mourn every cell fight—grateful I'm not too numb to feel sorrow, to cry.