

Restore Justice Foundation

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://restorejustice.org/visiting-prison-finding-strength/>

Campaign and Advocacy

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I should have been scared to visit prison. I say that because all of my life I've been told that prisoners are evil. But, are they? There is, of course, the obvious answer that they are because they were convicted of serious crimes that negatively affected the lives of people around them. Then, there's the answer that most of us choose to ignore: it is easier to mark these people as evil and lock them away than it is to believe that they have the ability to learn and grow. If nothing else, my recent trip to a maximum security prison in Illinois assured me that our country has to stop taking the easy way out.

It's worth mentioning that I know that the two men I met are part of a selected set of inmates. No one at Restore Justice, the criminal justice reform organization where I am an intern this summer, would have let a college freshman visit with them if they were dangerous. These men clearly do not want to be the people they were when they got to prison, and so they aren't anymore. They are people who have no incentive to change, but changed anyway, for themselves. Knowing that there are at least two men there who probably do not need to be separated from society gives me the confidence to say that there must be others in their same situation.

The visit itself was drastically more comfortable than the effort it took to get into the visiting room. Where the visit felt honest and welcoming, the process of entering the prison felt cold and dissociated. The prison workers are not there to help visitors; they are there to maintain control over the facility and everyone in it. It seemed like they trusted me as little as they trust the inmates. That became most obvious to me when I was told on my second day that I could not wear a hair tie on my wrist that the guard from the day before had let me keep. They said I could either put it in my hair or throw it out. I wanted to know their reasoning. Why was it different to have the hair tie in my hair rather than on my wrist? I was warned before I got to the prison, though, never to ask why.

I've always considered the question Why? an important one, as it shows you that a person cares and wants to understand. It shows curiosity. I found that the guards established some control over me, simply by changing the rules from one day to the next. I was too afraid that if I asked why that happened, they could refuse me a visit. And if I was perceived as being aggressive or rude by not respecting the new rule, that would surely get me thrown out. So for two days, I lived under the rule of Okay, not Why? and it was stifling. I pride myself on my curiosity and my right to ask and know why something is happening to me, but once I walked into the prison I was denied those answers. And I wasn't a prisoner there.

Amidst the negativity, though, the inmates I met had more optimism, humor, and wit than I've ever experienced meeting someone for the first time. They answered every question I had, and as we talked I learned more about who they are now and how they worked to become this person. It was their strength that stood out to me most of all. How do you choose to be happy when everyone around you is telling you that you are innately bad? Why would you bother to eat healthily and exercise regularly when the system you live in controls your body? How do you remain optimistic about your life when only a handful of people want you to come home? What if prison is your home? Although I'm sure they struggle with these questions and more, their personalities showed none of the burden and all of the strength it takes to get rid of it.

One of my jobs at Restore Justice is to read the letters inmates send in to us. It's both the hardest job I have and the best. Every once in a while I'll come across a quote that stands out to me. The one I still remember dozens of letters later reads: You are never too young or too old to make a mistake and to learn from it.

You can learn a lot from letters like these, but I had never felt the weight of this prisoner's words until after this visit. I believe that part of what makes humans special is our unique ability to learn and to grow in any environment. Believing in second chances is a part of that ability.

Even experiencing just a tiny bit of how these prisoners lead their lives certainly made me question my own life and freedoms. I could feel the difference between these men and me. I may have felt like I had no control for one minute in the waiting room, but even if I had spoken up and questioned the guards, nobody was going to put me in handcuffs and take me away. Nobody could look at me and immediately change my body language. Nobody could stop me from walking out of that building and never coming back.

Before this visit, I had never fully considered that while I go about my daily life at work and at school, there are people whose entire lives exist in a cell. Yes, some of them need to be there, but others really don't. They cannot leave and they might never leave. As I walked out the door, watching my new friends as they waited to be escorted back into the cells, I realized what a gift it was to have met them and what a bigger gift it was to have been able to go home at the end of the day.

That being said, I will go back to visit. I'll go because I enjoyed their company and because I admire their strength. I'll go back because I do not want to take the easy way out.

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