

Have You Ever Been To Jail?

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Summary: An invitation to reflect on the value of going to jail as a conscientious objector, for freedom's sake. Comments on two books about jail and her prison experiences. Relates the indignity of being in jail to the folly of the cross. (DDLW #231).

There is a fascination about prison literature, just as there is fascination and suspense in stories of pursuit. There is suspense in not knowing what is going to happen next, and anything can happen, and whether or not and when freedom will come. There is admiration, wonder and fear, too, that perhaps some day we will be in the same boat if it comes to standing up for principle.

During the war conscientious objectors, the absolutists, served sentences in Danbury, Lewisburg, Chillicothe, Ashland and other federal prisons, endured hunger strikes for long stretches, and forcible feedings and solitary confinement, overcame their fear, overcame also the world, and all in the name of freedom.

As Harold Robbins, the English Distributist, wrote: "Freedom is the primary and supreme reason for the existence of mankind. That He should be freely loved and served seems, so far as our thought can penetrate, to have been God's chief reason for calling us into being. At the cost of this freedom God could have established and maintained a world full of order, but not of justice, for free will is of the essence of human justice."

These men who have endured so much have borne witness to Truth and Justice, and so have served God, even those who denied Him. We can only say they have denied the God of the bourgeoisie, the God of the materialists, their money or their belly or their lust.

A Field of Broken Stones, by Lowell Naeve, in collaboration with David Wieck, and published by the Libertarian Press, Glen Gardner, New Jersey (\$3), and **Prison Etiquette**, the convict's Compendium of useful information, edited and with an introduction by Holley Cantine and Dachine Rainer, Retort Press, Bearsville, New York (\$2.50), are two books which have been published recently.

Both are illustrated by Lowell Naeve, an artist who served five years in prison during the last war and who is co-author of the first book and has an excerpt in the second. The second book was hand set and printed on a Gordon upright foot pedal press by the editors.

Courage

To me these men have shown a tremendous courage which is hard to analyze and make understood in these days of mediocrity, the times of “the regular fellow.” We talk about the saints and are thrilled by the idea of sanctity, but the question is, how would we react to a St. Francis, a St. Benedict Joseph Labre, a Cure of Ars? Human respect is one of the greatest stumbling blocks.

I repeat. We would not recognize the saint if we met him on the street corner today. He would be “the crank,” the “unbalanced,” the “trouble maker,” etc.

The conscientious objector portrayed in these books is even willing to give up his dignity, his person, because of his fierce faith in the dignity of other men, their sacredness (and from whom do they derive this sacred character except from God—they are sons of God).

These men went on long hunger strikes because of injustices to their brother the Negro. Why is he their brother, unless God is their father? Of course they share a common humanity. It was not enough that they lost their liberty and were held confined behind bars, for long hours and days and months awaiting trial, and were sentenced to interminable stretches in prison. Have you been in jail, I repeat. Or have you been on retreat at some convent or monastery and began to feel the oppression of the walls, and to shudder at the voluntary giving up of freedom of those who have had this vocation. I have been in jail twice, in Washington and in Chicago, and I also felt that sense of oppression on the first retreat I made when I became a Catholic. I felt oppressed, closed in, hemmed in, breathing an air which was not natural to me so that I got the spiritual “bends,” as men who work in compressed air sections in tunnels get “the bends” unless they go in and come out gradually, taking it little by little. We have to take our spiritual life in this way, and recognize we cannot impose on others, in our Houses of Hospitality or farms or retreat houses, a spiritual practice which they are not yet ready for. Even in this way these books may serve our readers as preparations for the times of trial to come, like the compression chambers into which the workers go before they get out under the river, or far into the tunnel under the mountain where they are called to their appointed task on which their life, their bread and butter depends.

These are books to be read with prayer in order to achieve understanding. For instance, do you know what it is to have your person violated, taken hold of, dragged, thrown, stripped and degraded? Jesus Christ knew these things and we view His way when we make the Stations of the Cross. These may seem extreme parallels, but St. Paul recalled that Trial as “the Folly of the Cross,” and so

indirectly referred to Christ as the Fool of His time. He loved even to folly. He said we should forgive seventy times seven. He said to love your enemies. He told that foolish tale of the prodigal son, which if you stop to think of it, is madness and folly on the part of the old man who showed such a lack of appreciation for the sturdy qualities of the older son and contributed so to the delinquency of the younger. Why did he give him his inheritance, knowing his temperament and that he would spend it on drink and women? And then to forgive him, to fall on his neck and embrace him, to feast with him and spend more money on him! No doubt the youth fell again and again and did the seventy times seven business work here? The folly of the Cross! The failure of the Cross!

I write these things because pacifism today seems just such folly. What good does a handful of men do?, everyone asks. How does one man going on hunger strike far away in a grey cell behind bars, mean laying down his life for his brother. And what good does it do?

One always is alone in doing these things. The revolution starts with oneself.

It is hard to see how men have the fortitude to endure the degradation of being mauled around when they make the gesture of refusing voluntarily to enter a jail and so force the guards to carry them, drag them, dump them on the floor of the jail. They endure this degradation in order that other men's bodies may be treated with respect. They have already paid a great penalty, being deprived of their liberty. But they continue their fight in jail by work strike and hunger strike and they win their fight again and again and win too the reluctant admiration of the other prisoners.

Prison Etiquette is made up of articles, stories, and poems and is illustrated, as is the other book, by Naeve. It is not likely that either book will be on sale in book stores One must order one's copy from the publication address given above.