

Why Not?

by

Matthew Feeney

So you're locked in a cage, packed tighter than sardines in a tin-can and feeling lost and hopeless. Survival is paramount. I understand. It's easier to lay in your bunk and sleep away your time with your eyes wide-shut than to participate in positive programming. Doing nothing is easily justified by thinking "*F-that, I ain't doing shit during this bit*" or "*what's the point, I'm ain't ever gettin' out*" or "*if the facility sponsors it, it's gotta be bullshit.*" But I'd like to suggest a different approach to doing time.

You're here. Life is... out there. To get to the other side of the fence, all you really have to do is punch your prison time-card and you will automatically get out (LWOP and "indeterminate" sentences will be specifically addressed later). In the meantime, we have all this time to burn up. Everyone is given 24 hours every day. Even while incarcerated. And every day we get the chance to make a choice with what to do with those hours. And remember, even if you made a bad choice last (week, month, year, decade), tomorrow you get another set of 24 hours with which you can make a different choice. A better choice. Why not?

Reading a book is a simple start. Whether it be a Vince Flynn adventure novel read purely for fun, or a book on Buddhist meditation or even a college Accounting text book, the act of reading helps develop and sharpen your cognitive ability, reasoning skills and empathy at the same time it improves your vocabulary and introduces you to exciting new worlds.

Even as a kid I always enjoyed reading, and so I ordered a bunch of books my first 2 weeks of prison. Walking back from property with this big stack of new books caught the

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watchful eye of a Lieutenant I had never met before. He commented on my being a reader and then, just like that, invited me to apply for the unposted chaplain assistant position in the spiritual library. I interviewed, got the job and loved it. When I was eventually transferred to my next prison, that initial job experience in the spiritual library helped me get a job in the new prison's regular library, where I worked very comfortably for three years. All this because an officer I didn't know happened to see a new guy coming from property with a stack of books. See, reading does make a difference!

My former DOC facility offered many unique educational opportunities, including in-person college classes as well as on-line degrees and even classes that provided certification for C-Tech computer network cabling that would guarantee a well-paying job immediately upon release.

But not every facility is as positive or supportive. My current facility had a policy that actually prohibited their Educational staff from helping to facilitate *any* educational opportunities beyond a GED. Instead of giving up, I asked questions, wrote kites and finally filed an official Grievance on this issue. Lo and behold, the facility listened and actually changed their policy! A few months later I became their very first client to ever take an approved accredited college class through Rio Salada¹ college. Despite being a writer, I decided to stretch myself by taking something way out of my comfort zone: *Financial & Tax Management for Small Businesses*. As luck would have it, I received my textbook and course work the week before we went on a COVID lock-down where we were restricted to our rooms 23 ½ hours a day. This was actually a blessing as I got four weeks of homework done in four days, and then I

¹ Rio Salado College: 2323 West 14th Street, Tempe AZ 85281. Telephone: 480-517-8334

stayed ahead even after we were off lock-down. Somehow my numbers must of added-up all right because I finished the class and passed.

I'm now currently taking a Buddhist Correspondence² course via U.S. Mail and enjoy learning completely new ideas and concepts. I'm on the waiting list for a 2023 program that provides a Master's in Humanities specifically developed for inmates through Cal State³, and I've formally inquired into the new "Prison to Law Pipeline"⁴ program I recently read about in the newspaper. Maureen Onyelobi is the first inmate *in the country* to get admitted to an accredited law school where she's going to earn a bona fide law degree and become a licensed attorney. She is a great example of someone shaping their own future, making the most of our time behind bars, and not being deterred simply because something hasn't been done before.

We may be locked in a cage, but they can't keep our minds imprisoned. Get out there and take an educational class, any class. Just do it. It'll not only make the time fly by, but you'll gain valuable experiences and credits that can help you stay out once you get out.

In addition to formal educational classes, my former DOC facility offered some amazing positive programming run by outside volunteers, including the *Redeeming Time*⁵ Shakespeare Theater program, *Alternatives to Violence Program*⁶ (AVP) and the *Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop*⁷ (MPWW). Not only did these programs offer an unique opportunity to spend time out of our cells, they enriched and advanced the lives of the participants.

² Phap Nguyen Buddhist Congregation, 1838 County Road 129, Pearland TX 77581-6239

³ Cal State University, Dominguez Hills, PO Box 2731, Orangevale CA 95662

⁴ www.allsquarempls.com

⁵ www.Redeeming-Time.org

⁶ www.AVPusa.com

⁷ www.mnprisonwriting.org

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I can honestly say attending that first MPWW class back in 2015 changed my life. It was because of that one class that I discovered I not only enjoyed writing, but was actually pretty decent at it. I started spending more time writing different types of things (including poetry) and was eventually assigned an amazing MPWW writing mentor who provided much needed feedback and encouragement. I was finally inspired to take the first (and only) story I had ever written and submit it to the real world for publication. I only had three addresses to submit things to, so I thought “Why Not? I have nothing to lose but the cost of postage,” and I feebly submitted my one and only story to those three publications.

The first publication (the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison*⁸) rejected my piece entirely because they don’t accept fiction (oops, my bad!). But the second (*The Beat Within*⁹) actually published my story. I was now officially a “published author.” That was so cool. But then I got blown out of the water when a few weeks later I was notified the submission I had sent to PEN America¹⁰ actually won 2nd place in Fiction, which included a substantial cash prize! I was hooked.

Since those first humble submissions (that didn’t even include a cover letter), I have had over 200 individual works published around the world, including a non-fiction essay that was recently published by the same *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* that had once turned me down. Lest you think publication in outside magazines and periodicals is easy, it’s important to realize that as of today’s date I have submitted 4,974 works to 525 unique publications¹¹.

⁸ JPP c/o University of Ottawa Press, 120 University, Ottawa Ontario K1N-6N5 CANADA

⁹ *The Beat Within*, PO Box 34310, San Francisco CA 94134

¹⁰ PEN America Prison Writing Program, 588 Broadway, Suite 303, New York NY 10012

¹¹ For a free copy of my spreadsheet of all my publication addresses, just send a request to Matthew Feeney, 1111 Highway 73, Moose Lake MN 55767

Why spend all that time, energy and postage in sending my writings out? Why not? I'm doing something constructive with my time, honing a new passion and working on usable skills that might become a future vocation... and sometimes even earning a few bucks every now and then. I've found my voice. I'm not only writing about grave injustices and flaws in the criminal justice system, but publication allows me to shout about these issues from the mountaintops!

And that brings us to the most difficult cases: LWOP (life without the possibility of parole) and the "indeterminate" sentence of civilly committed individuals. Why waste time improving yourself if you're never going to get a chance to see the light of freedom? Why educate yourself if you'll never be able to apply for a job in the real world or have a chance to work for a company that might care about your credentials? Why prance around like a fool and bother memorizing lines from some long-dead bard who didn't even have the courtesy to speak *normal* English? Why read a book about a place you'll never be able to visit? Why do anything?

What's the alternative? Have you got anything better to do with your time? Your life *is* important and you can make a difference in the world, even if it's from behind bars.

According to the newspaper article, Maureen Onyelobi, the inmate who was accepted into law school, is serving a LWOP sentence in Shakopee Minnesota. She didn't give up. In fact, she had to work extra hard to earn her Bachelor's and Master's degree while in prison before she could even apply to law school. She's my hero.

Hell, after I completed my entire maximum 6-year MN-DOC prison sentence, I was civilly committed to the notoriously draconic MSOP program, where I've lived for the last three years. And just like every one of the other 700 clients here, we're all being held on the same

unconstitutional “indeterminate” (*de facto* “life”) sentence. So yeah, I totally understand if you’re feeling overwhelmed and want to just put in your time.

So to answer the big questions of WHY: why do I care, why do I get up in the morning, why do I continue to educate myself, why do I participate in treatment, why do I take classes, why do I write essays like this... why do I do any of these things if there’s no possibility I’m ever getting out?

The answer is simple... Why not?