

TOUCHING LETTERS | BY JAMES KEOWN

I was arrested on November 7, 2005 and found guilty on July 2, 2008. Over the 936 days in between, my life was put through a blender. I was in jail for the first time. The narrative of what I believed to be a successful professional life unraveled. Many of my friends abandoned me. And I faced the reality that I might have to spend the rest of my life in prison.

Preparing for trial, I experienced indescribable stress and mounting legal concerns. I felt like I was living inside a complex maze where each time I discovered the pattern, the walls shifted. There were many nights when I laid in my steel bunk and felt like I couldn't take another day – another moment of my incarceration. Then I would reach into my locker and pull out an envelope from the ever growing stack of letters. The notes were written on different sized pieces of paper and cards. They sometimes included photos or drawings. Some writings were short – three or four lines – while others spilled out over pages. The one thing each letter in my collection had in common was my mother's handwriting.

Over 936 days, my mother wrote me close to one thousand letters. Not one mail call went by as I awaited trial that I did not receive at least one note from Mom – sometimes two or three. My mother's writings were the only positive constant during those terror-filled 936 days.

This July will mark ten years since I was convicted and sentenced to life without parole. Over those ten years, my mother has continued to write – rarely missing a day. Receiving, opening, and, especially, holding a note from my mother is the most important part of my day. Soon, the Massachusetts Department of Correction will strip me of the ability to hold my mother's words.

A new plan being rolled out at Massachusetts state prisons prevents those of us serving time from receiving the original copy of our mail. Instead, staff members will open and photocopy each letter, note, card, photo, or drawing that arrives in the prison mail box. The state says that the prohibition on mail must be put into places to stem the flow of drugs into state prisons. The DOC's reaction is a classic case of only seeing one part of an issue and failing to see what other consequences may come about because of a new policy.

What the DOC's new plan effectively means for me is that I will never again be able to touch a piece of writing from my mother. I will never again be able to hold the paper she wrote on to feel where her hands have been. I will never again be able to see the deep grooves her pen made in the paper as she shared a stressful situation at home. I will never again be able to discern a fallen tear on a page. And I will never again be able to catch the faintest fragrance of my home that I may never see again.

It is only mail, someone may say. That person does not understand anything about the reality of prison. I see people who have not received a note in over a decade check the mail list each day in the hope that they will see their name finally appear. I watch people grip the edges of letters from home while they pour over the words again and again. In here, it is not just mail. My mother's letters represent a physical connection to the world beyond the wall – to my home – to my family. Shortly, the DOC will sever that line.



They will disconnect the connection. Sure, the words and images may make it to me, but much of the feeling will be stripped away in the process of scanning and reproducing. What I will receive is not a note from my mother but a rough facsimile of her message.

I do not do drugs. I thank God often that I am not griped by the kind of addiction that I have seen destroy lives in this place. I am told by prison officials that the "problem" is with a small group of people. Then, I say, help those people and do not impose a cruel punishment on me. Do not strip away another layer of my humanity.

I do not know how I would have made it to trial without my mother's letters. Her words provided me with daily inspiration. But each time I held the paper she wrote on, I held onto something much more powerful than anything provided by the text. I held onto hope.

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