

Christmas Behind Bars
by
Charles N. Diorio

Christmas in prison is a forgotten time. Lockdown's during holidays and holy days are commonplace; fights flare and tempers rage. I spent this Christmas in my cell coming out for meals only. I had my radio, a window with bars, a toilet in the corner and considered the sliding steel door keeping people out rather than locking me in.

Prison is a lonely place where Christmas doesn't matter. Even the spirit of Christmas is locked away. No priests made rounds. No calls were made for religious services. Nobody seemed to acknowledge the season. Nobody acknowledged the reason for the holiday. If there were prayers they were said in the solitary of a cell.

Forced association, sensory deprivation, overcrowded conditions, and abject misery create a strange distraction, a confusion that like a nightmare is marked by the surreal. Here in the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center, a Massachusetts maximum security prison, inmates are being underfed and bodies grow thin and unhealthy. Drugs flourish, as does extortion, and violence.

Every day, numerous times daily, a disconnected voice announces: "we have an emergency. Freeze all units. We have an emergency. All direct line carries call..." marking a fight, a protest, a disturbance, or some other ugliness bringing the facility to a halt.

From the vertical window of my cell, I'm able to watch gaunt inmates

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moil, some stand just staring; some walk in lazy circles along the perimeter of the flats, the common area of the cell block. I watch black inmates with dusty skin, and white inmates their pallid appearance a mask. Always there's noise. Voices echo. Two guards watch this fools parade from their desk at the head of the unit. Shift change allow them to get to their Christmas, their family and freedom.

Inmates removed to solitary after a fight have their Christmas in the hole. Their property is tossed and lost. Guards treat inmate personal property like garbage. Papers and appliances are torn and broken - when not stolen by inmates who land on it like seagulls at the dump.

On Christmas eve eve, a fight broke out reminding the unit of the spectacle of prison life. This more than anything convinced me to lock in for the holiday. "Alone I'm in the best of company," I tell myself.

Christmas meal - served on a wet tray - two pieces of processed turkey, a dollop of mashed potato, sliced carrots, congealed green gravy. In a styrofoam container, cranberry jelly, a roll, imitation butter, and a packaged apple pie like the kind sold in fast food restaurants. Eating alone was a present to myself.

Every prisoner faces the trauma of loss. This prison, like all prison's, exploits misery. Deprivation is disciplinary detention. Inmates fade into malnutrition, desperation and hopelessness. What makes Souza-Baranowski barbaric is its pretense. Sterile hopelessness is taken for granted. Guards watch in shifts as bodies waste away.

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A few days before Christmas, two corrections officers made rounds. "Ho...ho..ho" said one. One officer opened the trap, while the one "Ho, ho, hoing" passed a bag of gifts to each inmate. A pair of socks, toothpaste, shaving cream, two bars of soap. Merry Christmas. Something about the gift, and the meal, made me sad and sick. Does this nod to kindness let them off the hook?

Christmas behind bars was like the evening meal, dry and bland. A lonely time where a silent prayer is a gift. I spent my weekend holiday thinking of trials and those suffering more than me. After all, I had my health and peace of mind. In my heart there remained the spirit of Christmas. I find the solitary meaning of Christmas remains in each of us. In our hearts, our souls, and the peace we are allowed.

End

Charles N. Diorio W103769
SBCC P.O.Box 8000
Shirley, MA 01464
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