

Serving Time in Jail

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Any act of civil disobedience implies the willingness to risk jail for one's convictions. For those who land there as a consequence of conscious decisions, jail can present an opportunity for testing, and strengthening spiritual and -political convictions. Though it should not be courted imprudently, it is something that must be faced and can certainly be endured. Those arrested as a result of civil disobedience have the advantage over most prisoners of knowing that they are there having made a conscious choice. That knowledge can make the difference between what is otherwise a thoroughly miserable situation and a larger possibility for reflection and education. What is more, it can provide you, when the time comes, with a reserve of strength of which you were previously unaware.

Being in jail can give a rounded picture of the militaristic, oppressive society against which we struggle in our nonviolent resistance. It is an education in the underside of justice. In state prisons throughout the country most of the people who are locked up are people of color. The vast majority are poor, in jail for poverty-related crimes or awaiting (and waiting and waiting) trial, because they cannot afford bail.

Jail is a lonely place. It aims to weaken solidarity, to try to isolate people from one another and reduce one's concentration to dealing with the demands of authority and of one's survival. However, no one in jail for affirming her or his conscience is ever alone. Remember that and you should have no trouble getting by.

What exactly can you expect? Jails differ as to particular conditions, regulations and privileges allowed. Yet, jails are enough alike that it is possible to make some rough generalizations. Entering prison is like going into another culture - new behavior norms' language, symbols, new reality. Go slow, and use common sense. To quote someone who served a year in Rhode Island's Adult Correctional Institute, "It took me six months to figure out what was really going on in prison. And I am not such a slow learner. So, be humble and be quiet, and listen and learn. "

You can expect overcrowding, which means frustrating and irritating levels of noise and distraction, little personal space or privacy' and scant regard for cleanliness. You must exercise patience, consideration and discipline to preserve peace and sanity. It will be difficult to sleep, there will be blaring radios and TV's, slamming bars, and loud arguments, which may make you irritable and short-tempered. Learn to watch for this in others and try to respect their need for space. Time will be distorted: Days will slip by but each hour will seem like an eternity. Food will be starchy and dull (don't expect vegetarian menus). You will learn to wait, for a phone call, a shower, a meal, the answer to a question, the time of day.

You may be issued a uniform. In that case, your clothes will be confiscated along with all your other belongings. You can expect a complete strip search including rectal and vaginal examination for contraband, the first of many other casual assaults on your dignity.

The guards have a great deal of power and they are aware of this. And because they are human beings, this knowledge tends to have a bad effect on them. Long exposure to jail, whether as a prisoner or a guard, tends to have a corrosive effect on one's confidence in human nature and goodness, and the guards are victims of this as well. They expect the worst out of people, and, not

surprisingly, they are not often disappointed. Their principal concern is to preserve order, which demands an atmosphere of unquestioning respect (fear) for authority. This is their contribution to the process of "rehabilitation," supplanting personal responsibility with thoughtless obedience and submission. You should try not to indulge them in their exalted self-image. Keep expecting that they should act with respect and compassion and you may be surprised by the results.

Perhaps you may surprise them into remembering that they and the prisoners in their charge share a common humanity. At least you may establish a basis for dialogue. But at the same time that you recall the humanity of your guards don't forget that, in the end, you and they have different jobs to perform. Let them be responsible for keeping order. You are responsible for keeping your conscience.

Just because your body is detained doesn't mean you've got to turn in your conscience and convictions along with your other belongings. Whether in jail or on the "outside," the freedom we enjoy is always the freedom we claim for ourselves. Being under lock and key does not deprive you of your essential freedom as long as you continue to insist on your power to say "yes" or "no" within the limits of whatever situation you find yourself. It was your commitment to make decisions for yourself about what you should and shouldn't do that landed you in jail in the first place, and it remains a good principle to live by, even in jail.

The following is a list of observations and suggestions from people who have served time:

- Pay attention to how the other women/men are doing. Don't feed into others' bad vibes
- You'll make good friends but do set limits. Know what your needs are.
- Keep your mouth shut and listen. Things are not often what they appear.
- Keep a realistic viewpoint. Pay attention to your needs, but remember that you are there for a short time and most of the others are there much longer.
- Don't proselytize. Be clear and be proud but don't hit people over the head with your story and beliefs.
- Don't talk more than you have to with the guards; the other inmates will not trust you. If you are in prison for a long time you'll be able to figure out which guards you can trust.
- Bring a few books, pens, paper, envelopes and stamps. The worst that can happen is you won't get them or they'll get lost.
- Be patient; hurry up and wait is often the prison time frame for no apparent reason.
- It is all right to be afraid, lonely, unhappy. It is also all right to feel wonderful, happy and proud.