

## **Prison Journal No. 3, March 30, 2006**

### **How to do “good time” in six month intervals**

A month down and I'm still in the Pottawattamie County Jail. I did not expect to be here this long. The last time I came through Pottawattamie County Jail was four years ago and it was less than a week before Federal Marshals drove me to the for-profit Federal holding facility in Leavenworth, Kansas. Then it took the Bureau of Prisons three months to assign me to the Federal prison camp in Duluth from Leavenworth. I traveled Con-Air to Oklahoma City then to the U.S.P. in Terre Haute, IN, for a week in the hole. From there we were bused to FPC in Oxford, WI, for an overnight. Then on over to FPC in Duluth. So it's still very early in the process and I could end up anywhere at this point. For now, the US government is paying Pottawattamie County \$75 a day, not counting meds, to house me in their jail.

The challenge for me is to live each day making the time serve me instead of me serving the time. So far, I'm winning but not without a plan.

This is my eighth six-month bit in my peacemaking career. So I consider myself an expert in doing 180-day stretches. The most important thing is to make sure your significant personal relationships are solidly behind you. They need not agree with your peacemaking ways. Few of us peacemaking outlaws can boast of total support of our nonviolent resistance actions from family and friends, yet to have the love and support of family and friends is most helpful. All of my significant relationships and family are solidly supporting me. It cannot be overstated how helpful this is.

It's also important that your outside jail work and responsibilities are not hurt or significantly diminished while you're locked up. In this regard, I am greatly blessed. As a member of the Des Moines Catholic Worker (DMCW) community, we are committed to supporting community members who risk jail time for nonviolently resisting war. These last few years the DMCW community has been able to afford the loss of a few community members to serve jail time while the everyday work of hospitality carries on. As DMCWer Ed Bloomer is fond of telling me, “Frank, we're out here for you, brother, so you can be in there for us.” Spoken as a true Catholic Worker!

It's important to have a good support system in place before you get locked up. Best not to assume it will just happen. Support needs to be thought out and prepared beforehand. Everybody's needs and circumstances are different, so what goes for support will vary from person to person. Again, past experience has helped me put in place a support system that makes my doing “good time” possible.

My first support principle is never to go to jail alone. Bring as many people as you can into the experience. The reason being that should you be unjustly treated while locked up, your friends and support people on the outside can come to your aid. This was the case last year in the Polk County Jail when I was not given needed heart medicines. There are lots of ways to bring people into the jail experience. One way we are doing this this time is through my 460 plus email support list in which friends and supporters are receiving my written journals and lectionary reflections and updates when needed.

Key to any support system is to have people designated and assign specific tasks. People you can count on to do what they said they would do. In this regard, I am doubly blessed! Fellow DMCW and Berrigan House resident, Fran Fuller, is serving as my main support person. This is Fran's third tour of duty with this assignment.

Fran is doing double duty. She has taken over job responsibilities I have at the Catholic Worker while I'm gone. These are managing the DMCW data base, editing our newsletter the *via pacis*, and making sure it gets in the mail, doing the Berrigan House books, and paying its bills, overseeing the DMCW web page, overseeing my mail and email account and, with Brian Terrell, being point persons for our planned October National Catholic Worker Gathering and most importantly, she is caring for Daniel and Phillip, my cats!

She is also the person who keeps tabs of my whereabouts and well being while I'm locked up. If I am in trouble and need help, Fran is my first responder. She knows who to call and if she does not, she will find out. She edits my prison journals. She is in charge of my email support list and emails my prison journals and lectionary reflections and updates. She makes sure I have enough money in my jail account. I call her twice a week. Fran Fuller is doing this six month sentence just as much as I am and I'm blessed for her unsung efforts and support.

Once locked up, a disciplined life that gives meaning and focus to each day served is most helpful. For me, this begins with paying attention to my physical, spiritual and emotional needs.

When I was younger, the main issues in doing jail time were social. How well would I handle living with an inmate population? As I've gotten older, my physical concerns have become critical. My first physical concern is getting my needed heart meds. I am getting them and I am grateful. Exercise is another physical concern and even though we never get outdoors, I walk three hours a day: 2 hours at Rec time and another hour in the unit. This is hard on my feet. The shower shoes they give us are not the best walking shoes. If I wear three pairs of socks and band-aids on critical toes, I get by. Within a few weeks, my feet have adjusted to the regiment. Diet is important also for physical well being. As I mentioned earlier, the food here ain't half bad for a county jail. A major discipline effort is needed to avoid eating too much junk food from the jail store.

I've discovered that dealing with futures in commodities can be just as risky in jail as out of jail. My desire for fresh fruit is well known in the Mod. During the week, a number of deals are made for the future apples and oranges that come on the weekends. A hamburger, chicken on the bone, a couple of hot dogs and two honey buns were given up in exchange for weekend fruit. During a cell shake down on Sunday night, I got caught with a bag of apples and oranges. I not only lost the fruit, I was locked down in my cell for 24 hours.

Meeting spiritual and emotional needs are perhaps most important to doing "good time". This is best done for me through a discipline routine of praying, reading and writing.

**Prayer:**

I used to say I was a better priest in jail than out of jail. One reason for this is my prayer life was much better in jail. This is because my immediate needs and challenges are greater. Jails and prisons are not easy places to be, even the best of them. The separation from loved ones, the lose of freedom and personal control, living in close quarters with other men, many of them with serious personal and social problems, the noise, the smells, all are hard on a person emotionally. And though you are never alone, loneliness is the most common experience because everyone does their own time, with nothing but "time" to reflect over and over, week after week, day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute, the circumstances that land you in jail. Prayer on the outside is often optional. Prayer on the inside is a necessity for survival.

My formal prayer is the Liturgy of the Hours, the prayer that priests are supposed to pray daily. I confess I was not very faithful praying the "Office" while an active priest. However, in jail, it's a perfect prayer for me.

I first got introduced to praying the Psalms while in jail in 1983. They are powerful, personal prayers with a full range of human emotions and needs expressed. In recent years, I've been troubled by all the violence found in the Psalms, especially the violence attributed to God. Like all human prayers, they are flawed. These days I make efforts to overlook the violence in the Psalms and focus on the heart and spirit of the voice in the Psalm with its human anguish, need and trust in God.

When I learned how to pray the Liturgy of the Hours as a priest, it was a natural prayer for me in jail. Because the Liturgy of the Hours is best prayed in a monastic setting and the jails and prisons I've been in are by design monastic-like environments. And unlike the "Office" I prayed on the outside, inside jail I'm not rushed to get done. I have plenty of time to pray, stop and reflect on a verse, re-read a line or two. And now that I find myself alone in a two-man cell for the last two weeks, I can even begin singing the Psalms. I also have a Catholic missalette here and since I have plenty of alone time, I've taken to singing the songs I know from the back half of my missalette. In short, my prayer life has never been better.

Being locked up really brings the Catholic part of me to the forefront. This is especially true when it comes to the Eucharist. Not having access to it makes my need and desire for it stronger. I've received Holy Communion four times so far. Three times from the lay Catholic bible folks who come weekly and one time from Fr. Jack McCaslin who visited me last week. Each time it's been a real spiritual high. I miss it terribly when it's not available and I'm ecstatic every time I get it.

### **Reading:**

Good reading is not easy to come by in these places. More often than not in county jails you are not allowed to have any books sent in to you. You are limited to what is available in the jail. It is no different here. We are limited to a small book rack in the Mod with no more than 200 books and most of them I would never read even while locked up. When I first arrived, I read the three best books on the rack: two John Grisham books, *The Testament* and *The Painted House* and James Michener's *Chesapeake*. After these three books, it was slim pickings.

The lack of good reading material might have been a major downer for me if it were not for the jail Chaplin, Rev. Dick Arant. Rev. Arant is really a good jail Chaplin and I hope to write more about him and his ministry here in my next journal reflection. One of the things he has done for me is to allow friends to send spiritual and religious paperback books to him and he, in turn, lets me read them. This is how I got the Liturgy of the Hours sent to me. So far I've read a book on Oscar Romero and I am reading a book on St. Francis and Mark and Louise Zwik's book on the Catholic Worker movement. Without access to good books, my time here would be greatly diminished.

I thing I sorely miss here is access to the news. We get little to none here. The best it gets for me is watching the first 15 minutes of the 5:30 pm national news on TV before our 5:45 pm lockdown. We can't hear the TV over the noise in the Mod. We have to read the text in closed-caption. This has all changed for me this last week. I started receiving the New York Times in the mail. Glory be to God! It just don't get any better.

## Writings:

The most self-indulging thing I do is to enlist my selfless support people to take my prison journals and lectionary scribbling in their raw handwritten form, edit them, type them into cyberspace, and have them emailed to my prison support list. Fran Fuller you already know does my prison journals. Barbara Hans and Andrea Molinari, the Director of the St. Joseph Education Center in West Des Moines, Iowa, edits my weekly lectionary reflections. Barbara takes my raw handwritten text and does the first edit and emails it to Andrea who does the second finer edit before he sends it to Fran to be emailed to my list. These good people are doing a Herculean feat and I am eternally in their debt.

The discipline of writing a reflection for the Sunday Lectionary text reminds me of a song in the musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, that Tavia, the main character, sings called "If I Were a Rich Man." In one of the verses, Tavia sings if he were a rich man he would not have to work very hard and he would have time to study the Holy Book. I am living out this verse in Tavia's song for I am truly a rich man who does not have to work very hard and has lots of time to study the Holy Book. This discipline more than anything else I do enriches my soul as I'm doing my time here in Pottawattamie County.

As good as all this is, I know it can all change in a moment's notice. All I need to hear is, "Cordaro, roll it up. The US Marshals are here to pick you up." And when that happens, my whole world changes. I could easily go to a more difficult place. It could take weeks to get situated into a new jail with its own routine and schedules, pluses and negatives. And to re-create the self disciplines of prayer, writing and reading is never easy. Even so, I am confident I have the building blocks in place to make any new jail or prison work for me and not against me.

In my next Prison Journal, I hope to address the other side of doing time, the communal side. And why I see it as a Gospel mandated ministry to visit the imprisoned. And sometimes with the help of God you actually see a captive or two set free from bonds that hold them down.

(Note: Shortly after this was written, Frank was moved to much less favorable conditions. You can write to him at: Frank Cordaro, Jackson County Jail, 210 US Hwy 75, Holton, KS 66436.)