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Escaping the prison of opinions



Highland Views

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Columnist

As I walked down the dimly lit hallway, passing row after row of steel bars, I saw his black hands before I saw his face. "Donny" was gripping the cold bars of his cell while flexing his muscular arms over and over.

He kept pushing and pulling even after greeting me with a "Hey, Chaplain!" and we began to talk about his day and the interfaith service the previous Sunday.

Like many of his fellow jail inmates, Donny attended the evening meetings out of curiosity and, as some admitted, to get out of the cell for an hour.

Donny and I stood there talking while the noise and activity of the jail flowed around us. He kept rocking back and

forth, near the bars, then away. I stood close to hear him. I could see the sweat dripping from his shirtless chest. I thought, "A good-looking young man; so sad he has such a drug problem to keep putting him back in here."

I'd been "visiting" Donny for several years. We saw each other passing on the street sometimes. Then, no surprise, I would see him at the jailhouse bars again, and again.

That afternoon, while Donny was exercising to while away the hours and build his already toughened body, he suddenly stopped. It wasn't always easy to tell if Donny was angry or just feeling intensely engaged with something.

He pulled himself to the bars. Our faces were inches apart.

Staring at me intently, he put his head to the side and gave me a wondering look. "You come in here week after week, year after year. You talk to us. You listen to us. You don't preach to us like some church-people do." He flashed a

knowing smile: "You show us what could be."

I asked him to explain that. I don't remember Donny's explanation, but I remember the impression he left on me. As a young African-American man who grew up in a mostly segregated neighborhood in a wealthy, liberal county, he really grew up on the streets, in the violent drug culture that instills a warped image of manhood.

What I heard Donny say was he saw me as a human being, a person of compassion (though my interfaith approach confused him a little) and a man. He was identifying a different model for what a person could do with their life, regardless of color or culture. I heard admiration as well as loss.

Most of all I heard a spark of hopefulness, maybe even joy, when the shadow of the cell couldn't hide the momentary smile that crossed his face, the face of another man.

He saw me as I saw him: as a person,

a man.

Whether we gathered as men or women, of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds, of various faiths or none, those jail services were memorable. The singing was wonderful. But the best part, at least for me, was the discussion.

Who listens to prisoners? Who is able to escape from the prison of their own opinions?

Each week I would bring in a one-sheet handout with something to read and discuss. (These papers often got passed around and discussed back in the cells.) I still hold on to some of these, and one I recently found is a page of quotes from Marcus Aurelius, Roman emperor and philosopher born in the year 121.

We had some insightful conversation about the quotes I drew from his famous "Meditations":

"People seek retreats for themselves,

See HIGHLAND, Page 3D