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Bannock and so much more

By Dwight and Wendy (Harder) Eisler

After we got married, we looked for an opportunity to volunteer together. Dwight had been listening to CBC and heard about a nun who lived full-time in a men's prison in Mexico. Something about that sparked a desire to do prison visitation. Although the idea seemed scary at first, it just seemed like the right thing to do. Wendy had previously visited in the women's side at Regional Psychiatric Centre (RPC) but when that ended, she felt that it would be something that she wanted to do as a couple if she ever got married. So when Dwight came home and talked about how he wanted to do prison visitation, the timing could not have been better.

We joked that this became our date night as we went out regularly every two weeks. We were a little nervous the first time meeting "Jerry" (not his real name) but those nerves were quickly dispelled as he is a very jovial and friendly guy.

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Conversation flowed easily for 1 ½ hour and time flew by. We learned a lot about who Jerry was and what he liked to do. We learned what his boyhood experiences had been. We also wanted to encourage him in his programming and the positive changes that he was making in his life. We gave him the opportunity to talk about his programming – like the anger management sessions. The more he could talk about the changes he was making, the more they became part of who he was.

He also inspired us. He spoke about circumstances in prison that make him frustrated and how he could walk away instead of letting the situation escalate. Dwight would often think of him when situations in his own work world got frustrating. “If Jerry could remain calm in prison, I could do the same considering all the freedom and choices that I have.” One highlight was the day that Jerry brought bannock that he made for the whole group. He did not want anyone to feel left out and made sure there was enough for everyone.

We always come away from our visits smiling. It does feel like we are sitting down to chat with a friend. We sit around a table, have a few munchies, and share about our lives. It is not scary or really very difficult. Now that Jerry has gotten to know us, he has shared more about his life and areas that he has messed up. He has done some bad things but he has been honest about that and wants life to be different upon his release. We hope that we can play a small part in helping make these positive changes in his life and, in the process, have our lives changed.

CoSA Report

In the circle of which I am member, we meet weekly at the Broadway Roastery. As we sip our regular and our decaffeinated choices, we do our customary circle within the circle. Each of us talks about “how we are”. In that context our core member is only one of 5 voices who shares how the week has gone. So in any one week, a member speculates how she might vote in the upcoming city elections. Another shares the pain of a child who is ill. A third worries about an upcoming interview. A fourth describes an hilariously funny event as he pulled an intoxicated driver out of the ditch. A fifth worries about getting his father into a respite home.

And which of the above is the story of the core person? Hard to say. Even though we know who our core person is, we all behave as core persons who share our woes and our hilarity. We behave as friends, and we all **have** become friends.

Jake Buhler

November 18 - 24 is Restorative Justice Week. What better time to get involved! Check out the activities taking place in your community.

'Inmate disturbances' on rise, figures show

BY TOBI COHEN, POSTMEDIA NEWS NOVEMBER 9, 2012

The number of inmate disturbances in federal prisons has risen significantly on the Conservative watch, according to government figures that suggest last year's 357 incidents marked a 12-year high.

Since the Conservatives took office there have been 840 inmate disturbances, according to figures reported in Public Accounts. During the previous six years under the Liberals, there were 482. The total cost of damages, however, has gone down. Inmate disturbances cost the government more than \$1.2 million over the last six years, compared to \$2.8 million during the previous six. That said, nearly half the damages recorded before the Tories took office were reported in 2001-02, the same year two major riots broke out at Drumheller and Edmonton Institutions. Also, since the government began tracking "intentional fires" two years ago, there have been 26.

Although the Correctional Service of Canada says the figures may be skewed since the government only tracked "prison riots" prior to 2005, as opposed to all disturbances which can include major and minor disruptions involving a few or many inmates, the numbers are raising questions about the government's tough-on-criminals approach. It's ultimately led to a "harsher" prison environment, according to Canada's corrections investigator, who attributes rising levels of unrest to a variety of related factors.

"When you get crowding, when you get a lack of capacity for delivering programs, when you have

inadequate institutional employment to keep inmates properly engaged, when you have double-bunking, then what you end up with is you inevitably end up with more tension," Howard Sapers said.

"You end up with more use of force, you end up with more self-harm, more incidents of assault and also you see things like staff overtime and staff sick leave also escalating."

During the Harper reign, inmates have seen their cigarettes taken away from them, the prison farm program abolished and reduced access to rehabilitation and reintegration programs. More recently, inmates were told they'd be charged more for room and board and telephone calls, while incentive pay for taking on certain prison jobs was cut. Public Safety Minister Vic Toews also announced recently that he wanted prison pizza parties and take-out nights abolished.

"It would be dangerous to base a conclusion on any one single incident like the smoking ban or closure of prison farms, but when you take in combination with other capacity issues plus the profile of the offenders themselves, offenders with more mental health issues, for example, then you begin to see how this constellation of issues comes together," Sapers said.

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The preceding Star Phoenix article relates the current situation within our federal prisons. Recent cutbacks have led to further frustrations not only amongst the prison population but among correctional staff and chaplains as well. In Saskatoon, one of the results of this is that our Person to Person times have been changed to fit within the various family visiting times during the week. There are no more group visits, which means that the community feel that has always been part of P2P. Volunteers with full time jobs during the week and busy weekends can no longer visit. A further result is a cut in government funding to our community chaplain program. In Prince Albert, federal funding has been restored for the P2P program, but only until the end of March. What is to become of the P2P program there remains to be seen. It is difficult to know how to respond to these changes. What is your response? What can we do to voice our concerns in regard to these changes? We welcome your input. Please call 653-3099 or email micahcoordinator@gmail.com. You can also write your newspaper editor or your local Member of Parliament. Please make your views known.

Get lost!

The idea of worship or reverence for a supreme being is part of all major world religions. All people who are devout followers of God, Allah, Jehovah are called to worship and devote all of their lives to their higher power. Even people who do not subscribe to a particular faith often work from a set of principles that they allow to guide their lives. Many people have something bigger than ourselves that we allow to draw us on into being a better person in some way.

When it comes to devotion, there are two main options for doing what you do with that entity that urges you on. Many followers feel that their own emotional and physical well-being is the whole point of their god's existence. They want to feel good when they lay their head on the pillow at night, and that can happen through either being content that they have somehow accomplished what they were put on the world to do, or patting themselves on the back for the way they helped someone who needed help. In other words, they helped someone not like them. Each of those look good at first glance, but ultimately falls short of the greater good.

The other option is to get lost, and I think that this approach ultimately helps our planet and the people on it to be healthier and more in-tune with who they are. We who tend to congratulate ourselves need to get lost in the bigger picture of what is happening in the world. We need to realize that reaching out to another human being is important, but it somehow becomes more when we do it, not out of a sense of self-fulfillment, but out of the realization that we are all the same. We help when we can, and we accept help when we can. We have to remember that we all have something to contribute, and we all have something that we need to accept from someone else. From the CEO to the homeless under the bridge, we all have something to give. Sometimes it takes a little work to get to the heart of a person, but effort often brings goodness. So get lost. Lose yourself in the teeming rhythm of your world, your city or town. As you forget yourself and remember others, the world changes for the better.

Darren Friesen

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