

INTRODUCTION

More than 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the United States. Millions upon millions of others—among them wives and husbands, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, daughters and sons—wait for their return.

Some wait quietly. They go about the daily routines of living. They welcome the collect phone calls from their locked-away loved ones, and travel whatever the distance to pay them regular visits. They cry. They pray. They live in hope.

Others make some noise while they wait. They put muscle to their longing. They organize. They lobby their legislators. With posters held high, they demonstrate for changes in laws, changes in policies, changes in anything that will result in their loved ones coming home.

Many wait and struggle—to put food on the table, to pay for those costly collect calls, to protect their families from being swallowed whole by poverty. With the incarceration of a family member who may have been the main source of financial support, the struggle to make ends meet looms ever larger and threatens to overshadow everything else. And in a world where monitored letters, monitored phone calls, and monitored visits pass for normal, they struggle to maintain family ties and some degree of intimacy.

There are also those who wait until the waiting becomes too great. They grow tired. They give up. They leave.

Counting the Years: Real-Life Stories about Waiting for Loved Ones to Return Home from Prison illuminates the weight of the wait experienced by families and friends of the incarcerated. This anthology allows them to share their longing and their lives. The hope is that, over time, hearing these stories and others like them will lead the larger society to put aside stereotypes and myths about this population and see them for who they really are; they are like the rest of us. And in telling their stories, the people of this largely forgotten population might inspire, encourage, and motivate those in similar situations.

The idea for this book had its roots in volunteer work that I began nearly a decade ago, after joining the Prison Ministry of the Riverside Church, a New York church internationally recognized for its commitment to social justice. I was asked to correspond with incarcerated men and women who wrote to the organization. And so I did.

Although generally dehumanized and demonized, the people I came to know through letters were multidimensional,

complex human beings. More than a few were skilled and talented in a range of disciplines, from art and music to sociology, business, and the law. And many had used their time in prison to rethink and disavow the values and belief systems that had brought them there.

The people I came to know were much greater than the bad choices they'd made. And they so inspired me that I would eventually found and devote myself to a publishing company that, as part of its mission, would seek to present a more balanced view of the incarcerated through books that would allow them a voice and help them tackle some of the hard challenges they face.

My husband, Joseph Robinson—for whom I wait, and make some noise while doing so—helped to give definition and structure to my book idea. He suggested that I develop a series of books that portray the realities, gifts, and diversity of experiences of people with prison in their backgrounds. The series would take its name from the title of the book he wrote several years ago to help people currently or formerly in prison to use their innate gifts to build successful lives: *Think Outside the Cell: An Entrepreneur's Guide for the Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated*. Other books in the Think Outside the Cell Series include *Love Lives Here, Too: Real-Life Stories about Prison Marriages and Relationships*, and *The Hard Journey Home: Real-Life Stories about Reentering Society after Incarceration*.

Contributors to *Counting the Years* write about waiting from various standpoints. For Lowanna Owens, waiting for her son to return home from prison was something she could

never have contemplated: “We were a ‘Bill Cosby’ family, educated blacks with class and standards. We were middle class, lived in the suburbs outside of Los Angeles, and had a loving extended family. All was good. Or so I thought. Of our three children, Preston is our middle child...He could run fast, his eye-hand coordination was impressive, and he was good in all sports...He had excellent manners...There was childhood mischief, but we never considered that a sign of future problems. He was all boy, with the promise of being a great athlete with good looks and intelligence.”

Franklin Ray Brown’s children thought that an initiative on an election ballot would be his ticket home: “Before the election, polls had the initiative to repeal the law winning. For my family that meant that within ninety days after its approval, my children would have their dad home...The joy and excitement that I heard in their voices made me feel that I would be able to be a real father for the first time. We counted the days until the election.”

Delores Mariano recalls the end of her wait for her incarcerated daughter: “I sit and stare at that gate and those fences that have held her all these months. I wonder how she will be when she walks through the gate. Will there be the hateful yelling, and the pushing away of the baby she can’t deal with? Or will she have truly changed? Will she be able to demonstrate heartfelt love and acceptance of her child? Will she learn to care for and love the child who looks at her pictures and calls out “Mama?” I wonder...Here she comes. My heart races; I am actually scared to death. I don’t want her to come through that gate.”

Ashley White shares the ordeal surrounding her weekly visits to her husband: “At this point, I’m beat. I got up at 1:00 a.m. I left my house at 2:00 a.m. I’m just about to shut my eyes when I see his face coming through the heavy metal door that slams behind him. He looks at me and smiles. I’m happy to see him but sick of all this crap I have to go through to get in here to see him for six hours a week. We sit next to each other, hold hands, and briefly kiss. All we can do is talk and fantasize about when he comes home...It’s so loud...I can’t concentrate. I start fights with my husband because I just can’t act ‘normal’ in here. I laugh, and then I cry.”

Ebonny Fowler recalls how, days before her fourteenth birthday, she waited for her brother to come home with a gift of sneakers: “Jamal never made it home that night. He was wrongfully arrested for a crime he didn’t commit and has spent the last twenty years in prison. I’ve been waiting for my brother to come back home for two decades—240 months; 7,306 days, and counting...For the last twenty years I’ve been constantly waiting...Waiting for my brother to be exonerated.”

And Jeff Smith shares how his wait ended in the greatest tragedy for any parent: “Since Saturday I have been speaking of my son Whitney in the past tense. I would, of course, rather take my own life than to acknowledge so actively the reality of what has happened with my own speaking voice, and it would be a far easier thing. But today is the day which has been chosen to honor his life, since that is now the only thing left to us to do for him.”

I hope that *Counting the Years* honors all those who wait, and that the stories here help to illuminate how the impact

of our nation's little-debated criminal justice policies reaches far beyond prison walls.

—*Sheila R. Rule*
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Jeff Smith

The Greatest Tragedy

My son, Whitney Smith, had served just over three years of his six-year sentence at the United States Penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana, when he died of an apparent suicide. Although he was allowed to receive all-day visits from me once a month and we spoke every few days on the phone, it was chiefly through letters that we maintained and even strengthened the bond that had always existed between us—especially during the last fifteen months of his life, when he was placed in solitary confinement with no visiting or phone privileges.

During those three years, we wrote several letters a week to each other, covering every subject imaginable: politics, science, philosophy, sports; the travails, dangers, and injustices of prison life; his evolving plans for his future after prison. Whitney himself noted early on that as awful as the circumstances were,

the act of letter writing was bringing us even closer together than we might have become otherwise, and he wanted me to know how grateful he was for that. Had he survived prison, we would have enjoyed the fruits of that relationship deepening for the rest of our lives. As it is, the survivor is left with the bittersweet recognition of what we had offset against what could have been.

Among many other things, the life of an inmate is about waiting: for the next letter—at least if you're fortunate enough to have someone who writes to you—and ultimately for the day you're finally released. But for the countless loved ones and families of the incarcerated—myself included—life becomes almost defined by the wait, as well. It becomes the act of holding your breath for years at a time, the sense that life will remain incomplete until your loved one comes home. In my case, it wasn't about passively waiting out the time. I saw my role as not only providing support as a lifeline to home and family, but also as an active participant in Whit's personal journey. And our relationship was such that he *invited* me to participate, sharing with me his honest, innermost fears, joys, sorrows, hopes, and plans for the future, and always asking for advice. There was a tacit understanding that we needed each other.

I knew Whit was coming home, and I knew that if he were to realize all of his beautiful potential after returning, he would need continuous encouragement along the way. I'm sure my own friends and family thought that my devotion sometimes bordered on the excessive—since phone calls from inmates weren't allowed to cell phone numbers, I had call forwarding permanently set on my landline so that no matter

where I was, I would never miss a call. Oddly enough, relating to Whit was not unlike what many parents experience in “normal” circumstances. Assuming you’re fortunate enough to have a child who actually does ask for and appreciate help, he or she will still sometimes point out when you’re smothering or giving too much. Like any other young person, Whit needed enough freedom to find his own way. To his everlasting credit—and as an indication of how strong our relationship was—Whit was honest and forthright enough to lovingly tell me when I needed to back off, even as he would be quick to assure me that even that particular heavy-handed intervention was appreciated. Unconditional love was a given, but mutual trust was the bottom line of our relationship.

As hard as these years were for me as a parent, I knew full well how much more Whit suffered, and how hard he worked to earn both his own self-respect and the devotion of those who loved him. This was perhaps best put at his memorial service by Michael Millard, a close friend of mine from Vermont who met Whit in person for the first and last time at Terre Haute in 2007:

“When I met Whit, he had really begun to ask himself (as a grown man), ‘So, what IS it with me?’ He saw the trail behind and asked, ‘Why?’ He did NOT understand. He asked these things fully and honestly. There was no ‘right answer;’ he wanted the truth. And he did most of the work of understanding the why and wherefore of his life, which most of us do between the ages of twenty-five and fifty years, in the four years from twenty to twenty-five. He began, in all facets

of his life, to take full responsibility for himself, his choices, and his actions.

If you need any measure of the quality of the man, I ask you to envision a twenty-year-old learning this in the context of the hell which is Terre Haute F.C.C. This is an extraordinary human being.”

So that’s what I was waiting for. To see that extraordinary human being who was my son come home and flourish in the world.

Instead, I found myself in the unfathomably desperate situation of having to write these words to read at his memorial:

“A short time ago I was part, without taking part, of a memorial for a young girl who was taken from her parents and family. It hurt me to the core, and still does. I now know part of the reason why that is so. It’s not only that I have always been constitutionally unable to keep from going straight to the hurt of others and absorbing it. It’s also because I have always known the loss of my son or daughter would be the greatest tragedy of my life. And here I am.

Since Saturday I have been speaking of my son, Whitney, in the past tense. I would, of course, rather take my own life than to acknowledge so actively the reality of what has happened with my own speaking voice, and it would be a far easier thing. But today is the day which has been chosen to honor his life, since that is now the only thing left to us to do for him.

There are often remembrances that provoke kind, poignant laughter at a memorial. I will not be the one who is able to provide that, but I know, and am grateful, that others will.

Whit's life was painfully short, and it was painful and short. But it was only the last half that was so full of pain. Whit was a curious, fun-loving, sensitive, and kind boy. There is scarcely one of you here who knew him personally, and perhaps even some who did not, who was not at one time or another the recipient of a random act of kindness from Whit. This began in his earliest life, when he bestowed these unexpectedly and in various forms on his parents. Cards, notes, even a card I found recently with fifteen cents taped inside, given I suppose when he was seven or eight. He loved to surprise with expressions of love and gratitude.

He loved animals, and was devastated when he had to see our first dog struck and killed by a car when he was quite young. He and his grandfather fashioned a cement grave marker with a big heart fingered into the unset concrete. I still have a mouse pad made from a photo of him sitting happily on a chair, holding the next dog, his beloved Milli Vanilli.

I cannot begin to tell of all the ways, large and small, in which his generous, caring, and, yes, in some way fragile, spirit shone through. His life was a crooked path. It can be said, depending on your views about these things, that he made bad choices, and that they were his to make. Or that he was compelled to make them as part of his nature, no less than the beautiful, non-self-defeating side. First of all, I tend to see those choices as an aspect of his inherent creativity. That he did things that were considered hurtful to his family, and later ones violated the norms of society, all came, I believe, as a surprise to him. Not that they were hurtful, but that, in retrospect, he had done them. He was never able to understand why, as hard as he

tried. And it was not because he didn't try. He was exquisitely thoughtful and self-aware. And part of what always hurt me was to see how helpless he felt from that inability to understand it himself. There were some who considered his self-defeating actions, even the extreme ones, as nothing more than willful self-indulgence. I always knew better.

I was always the one who gave him the benefit of the doubt. It was not that I couldn't or didn't see the consequences his actions had on others, and that they were hurtful to him, as well. But as for his early life, you only need to listen to the others who will speak in both his and their own voices, to understand what it was I saw.

His continual, honest search for identity at some point brought him to prison, once and then again. Rather than be discouraged by the actions that brought him there, I somehow was always able to see even that in the context of a whole life, knowing with absolute certainty who he was in his core, and what he had the potential to become. Every single word in the thousands of letters he wrote to me, from Dayton and then Terre Haute, was painfully honest, insightful, and indisputably genuine evidence of and justification for my faith in him.

Today a comment was posted on his blog, from someone who didn't leave a name, which reads: *'I came across this blog today while doing research for my job. I have been reading these posts and they have brought laughter and sorrow. Your son was brilliant, creative, and intelligent. I only wish that I had found these writings sooner. My heart is with your family.'*

Which brings me to Whitney's blog. Last November he told me he wanted to write one, and asked if I would set it

up for him. Since he had no access to a computer, he wrote each entry by hand and mailed it to me. It didn't become an overnight success, but it has grown to hundreds of regular readers from all over the world. And the numbers have grown exponentially since Saturday. It will remain the most publicly visible and successful manifestation of and testament to his beauty, honesty, and depth of soul.

I have to say in this context that I am personally ambivalent about the meaningfulness and significance of memorial services like this. I find it too easy to try and reject reality as not real and not true, and find only abject irony in being forced into this situation, as if remembering my son could do anything for *him* now. Which is ultimately the only thing that matters to me, even now. But at the same time, for whatever reasons, whether of any *ultimate* meaning or not, I am compelled to wish the entire world would read his words and hear his voice. I myself cannot do so without the pain of disconnect, but others can.

I find it tragic that his place and condition dictated that some of his most creative expression had to come from writing about his utter pain, frustration, depression, and the inherently inhumane conditions under which he was forced to live. Yes, of course, that's all he had to write about, and of course it was in part the extremity of his existence that made his writing so powerful—though not only, because he wrote well and beautifully of many things throughout his life. One of his readers described his writing once as “seriously vivid,” and while there are many equally apt descriptions, I've always liked this one. And had it been allowed to be just a stage of

development, fodder for something to come later, I would feel less angry and cheated—for his sake and all of ours—by the necessity of the subject matter. But that cannot be changed, and we have this permanent record of a beautiful voice calling out from one of the worst places on earth. He uses humor often, even as a basic device; that is because he has a natural sense of humor, and because it is the only way he can get even a little bit of distance from the pain and horror.

The world is not a very nice place. But Whit's very existence was an infinitely beautiful thing for me. And the world is at least nice enough, and Whit's soul such an incomparably beautiful one, that he deserved more life, but he also deserved better than what life gave him. I will believe with absolute certainty, for as long as I have left to live, that had the prison system not broken him, he would have come home a whole person and made the world a *better* place. He was finding his voice, and his true, beautiful self was winning the internal struggle. He was ready to come home. He had plans and ambitions.

I would like to finish now by reading the last thing I wrote to my son. It was a birthday card, and I am not even sure whether he received it. The sentiment on the card reads:

'Your journey has molded you for your greater good, and it was exactly what it needed to be. Don't think that you've lost time. It took each and every situation you have encountered to bring you to the now. And now is right on *time*.'

And inside I wrote:

'I may not be Zen-like enough to buy into the first sentence, or at least the second clause, but I have always tried to embrace it, and it would be well if you're able to. I know; it's hard not

to wish there had been a different, less painful path taking you to the same destination. But as for the rest of this view, I'm definitely a subscriber. I know who you've always been, who you are today, and I see who you're becoming, and I could not be more proud. So no, don't think that you've lost time. Look at what you've been able to become and accomplish in such adverse conditions, and then imagine how it will feel to take that and run with it in a world that's wide open to you. Hemingway wrote: "The world breaks everyone, and afterwards some are stronger in the broken places." That's you.

So as you turn twenty-five, don't dwell on the past but take what you need from it to carry with you into the future. Some of it comes in the form of a burden, but never forget how many people are walking beside you, eager to help you carry that part until it can be put down and left behind.'

I was always proud of my son. There was never a moment when I lost faith in him. I hope every one of you comes away from this understanding why he deserved that."