

**MY FATHER** died when he was in prison for child molestation. Before he died, I was able to go to the hospital's prison ward. My father had liver cancer, so his body had bloated while the shackles were on his wrists and ankles. There were open red wounds where the shackles had been. I was told that child molesters were treated as less than human by both guards and inmates. They were subject to beatings and isolation. But my father was still my father to me.

Alone in the room with the guard, my father in a coma, I stood trembling, sobbing. I couldn't stop shaking. The guard stood in the corner, stoic, formal. I could sense he was watching me. I looked up. I watched him struggle for a moment. He clearly wanted to say something, but he was bound by something invisible, something I discovered was a protocol that blocked his humanity—a protocol that his willingness to break changed the course of the entire experience for me.

"He was a good man," the guard said, looking at my father. My eyes widened. More tears poured. No one, much less a guard, could say that about him after what he had been convicted of. I froze in disbelief as the guard continued, "I asked for this detail. He's funny. As bad as it is in there, he would always try to make me laugh. We became as close as you can be in that situation." For one moment, the guard let me see that his heart was breaking too. He let me see that he too was hurting.

In that place of aloneness, because of what that man did, we were not alone. My guess is that the guard was saving himself as well on that day. All cruelty begins with withheld love. He did the equation and chose to do what was honorable, rather than what was right. Thanks to him, my father died with dignity, something every human deserves, the lack of which is a contagion that fosters the sickness that creates the need for the hospitals we call prisons in the first place.

Not only the incarcerated are in prison. Many spend their lives inside a prison without bars, pleasing others, subverting their dreams and desires. And what about those people who are so honorable, they willingly go into institutions and put their lives on the line in order to provide safety for society in general?

Recognizing that reality is made up of relationships, and understanding that in a prison it isn't only the inmates but also the guards who experience the realities of incarceration, we want to build freedom for everyone in the prison system and we want to do this by honoring the noble heart of the protectors. We want to do this by being honest, and by admitting that as a culture we have abandoned the prison guards as well as the prisoners.

I want to say to the guards, “Because you are so strong and stoic in your job, we have made assumptions and failed to lift your burden. Who will make you feel safe while you ensure that we feel safe? Who will pay attention to the burden and the stress you carry in the name of the kind of duty that goes beyond what humans are meant to hold alone? Who tends to your humanity, so that our world can become a more humane place?”

I want to add that, for this reason, I feel you, the beating heart that lies beneath the body armor. I want to give back what that one guard gave to me and to my father.

In a world of smartphone videos, we are now aware of what can happen when our guardians are overburdened, when they have to dismiss their own humanity, their own heartbreak at what they witness. Pressure blows and people are harmed, and now those acts mark an entire class of protectors.

When what we do to the incarcerated is done to you, where an incident, rather than marking the failure of a culture to carry the burden together, has us turn against you instead, we abandon our soldier on the field. We abandon you. How, then, are any of us—and yes, you must be included in this—to feel safe?

You are forced to abandon your humanity in order to protect, not for your own safety and good, but because people who abandon their humanity see the world with a cold heart. Problems occur and mistakes are made. This is the difficulty with America’s prison system. You did not cause it and you can’t control it. The system has become a punishment, where change is compelled and behavior is driven underground, only to reappear when no one is watching.

We want to change this. We want human beings in the prison system to uncover the desire to participate and contribute to society, to join, to become part of an imperative that lies in our DNA as human beings. But first we need to recognize the need to show you how you are capable of doing this, then provide you with the needed resources to achieve such a purpose. ■

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