

## What Are We Up Against in Life?

Back in the 1960's, Joe Matthews of The Ecumenical Institute in Chicago invented the word "upagainstness." It became part of the common language of the Institute and has served to this day in the closing rite of The Exodus Program. You will not find such a word in the dictionary, but you will find the phrase "up against" as meaning "that which we are confronted with," and it comes very close to what Joe Matthews was talking about.

We experience many things in life. There are barriers, blocks, disappointments, failures, and then there is the upagainstness. The first four can be dealt with and have the potential of being moved or eliminated. The upagainstness cannot be moved. It is there and will always be there as part of a person's life. The only option is to take a relationship to it and decide what it is going to mean. We all are born, and we all are going to die, as Matthews often said, "they are part of the "just thereness of life." Part of your task in life is to decide what they are going to mean.

There are many examples that help us understand this concept. Take the person who has been fired from a job. Can they ever again be a person who has never been fired? They may find another job or be rehired, but the fact remains that they are someone who was once fired. They can deny it, make believe it didn't happen, or rationalize that it was not important. These are simply ways of relating to what happened.

Sometimes we treat things that happen in our lives as an "upagainstness," when in fact they are not. The person in prison who decides that life is on hold and nothing significant can happen until he/she gets out, is treating the experience as upagainstness when in fact it is not.

About ten years ago a man came up to me in the hall at Walkkill Correctional Facility. He told me that the superintendent was insisting that he go to school and earn his G.E.D. He

wanted me to intervene and ask the superintendent to excuse him. I explained that I wasn't in the business of getting people out of school. He explained to me that he was sure he was going to die in prison and that it didn't make sense to go to school. He went on to explain that he had AIDS and was convinced he was going to die and would not make it to parole. As we continued to talk, he mentioned that he had two young sons. I pointed out what it might mean to them if they could attend his graduation and see their father achieve this important goal. He pondered all this and a year later when he did graduate his sons were there and quite proud of their father's accomplishment.

Prison and AIDS had become for him an "upagainstness." Life had stopped and no further creative steps could be taken. We all live between our birth and our death. These are certainly realities that we live against. But the journey between them we call life and we certainly have a lot of control over its meaning and purpose. Job cursed the day he was born and there is a whole industry out there that tries to offer ways to staying young and avoiding death. Joe used to say, "If any of you know that you will not die you ought to get a post care out to the rest of us." We all have heard the saying, "You only have one life to live." Joe used to say, "You only have one death to die."

Each week<sup>1</sup> in Exodus we recite the opening and closing rites in which this journey we call life becomes part of our common memory.

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<sup>1</sup> The Opening Rite

Leader: Let us come to terms with life.

Group: Our life is in the human struggle. The struggle is painful and deep. The struggle holds death and life.

Leader: Out of the struggle of the now, we will create the human world of the future.

Group: The past is approved. The present is received. The future is open.

The Closing Rite

Leader: We stand before the upagainstness in life.

Group: We stand before the possibility and hope in life.

Leader: Our hope is in our decision to embrace all that is, as that out of which our life will come.

## “Doing Time”

People in prison think a great deal about time. The evidence of this can be seen in the demand for calendars, and heard in the constant reference to “doing your time.” The person in prison knows more about measuring off days than anyone else in our society. He/She can probably rattle off dates relative to parole, conditional release, max-outs, quicker than a relative’s birthday. He often can give you the exact number of days left in any given category. She may keep records on the wall, cross off squares on the calendar, and continually figure her time again and again. Time is a companion. It is felt deeply, and a person knows well how much even time can take its time.

There is another aspect about time that is not always familiar to every person in prison. Time is known in its quantity, but not always in terms of its quality. Time passes, but it is not always measured in terms of meaning. We expect time to pass but not always to produce profound change in our lives. In prison, we always want time to run faster, but we do not always want it to run deep.

Ought we not have the right to expect more of time than just that it pass? Do not we who are in prison have the right to have our lives filled with meaning? Do we not have the right to expect the quality of time in prison to effect the course of our lives in a positive way? Some would say yes while others would insist that it doesn’t make any difference because time in prison is empty and meaningless and never can have any value.

The truth, however, is the direct opposite. No other time in life will affect us more than time in prison. Its effect will run so deep that we will never be the same again. If we don’t see

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Group: We decide if death is life, and if life is death. We will create a human world by deciding to live the life we have, for the sake of humanity.

this, we are fools. Prison time is serious time that changes life at the deepest level. You might think you can go back to old ways and old habits, but, simply because time has passed, you are not the same and your world isn't either.

Because prison time has such a deep effect on our lives, that doesn't mean you can call it good. Time in terms of meaning is not a moral judgment of good or bad. Time in terms of meaning is a matter of significance and therefore always has great value. Because we know that it can change some people into living vegetables and walking dead people, and others into new human beings, we know that it is always very heavy with meaning.