

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 affect 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 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.