

Leonard

I remember Leonard. I met him in the prison ward at Westchester Medical Center in the late 70s. I asked what brought him to the hospital. He didn't say anything but pulled up his shirt and showed me a scar that went from the middle of his stomach, around to almost the middle of his back. It was the largest incision I had ever seen. He had a kidney removed a few months earlier and didn't understand what the lumps were that appeared along the incision. The doctors talked to him about chemotherapy and other treatments, but Leonard did not quite understand what they were talking about. Even though he didn't quite understand, I think he knew the score. The doctors had not explained whether he would live or die, and after having spent most of his 26 years in prison he never quite figured out if he was dead or alive anyway. In his own way he seemed to be pondering questions like, Will I live? Am I alive? Am I dead already?

I found out later that Leonard refused treatment and was sent back to his "home prison." I had told Leonard that I would visit him again and was scheduled to be at that prison in two weeks. When I arrived, I went to the hospital and asked if they had an inmate by the name of Leonard. The nurse didn't respond to the name but asked if I knew his number. I said no, but that he was an inmate with a big scar. She responded, "Oh, the man with the big scar. He was here but was transferred to another prison a few days ago."

Three weeks later I was at that prison and went to the hospital and asked for Leonard. The same conversation took place. The nurse said, "Leonard who?" I said, "He was an inmate with a very large scar." She responded, "Oh, the man with the big scar. Yes, he was here, but he died last week."

I have often thought about Leonard since that experience. In prison you may be known by what you have done, by what you do, by what you claim to be, or you may be known by your wounds. Leonard was known by his wounds.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky once said, “The degree of civilization in any society may be determined by entering its prisons.” When we think of Leonard, we could probably say that the wounds of any society may be discovered when entering its prisons.