

Sound Body – Sound Mind

In the decade of the '90s there was a lot of discussion in the media about proposals to remove from U.S. prisons all weight-lifting and other physical fitness equipment. Like college education, physical fitness was something middle class citizens "paid for dearly," and therefore inmates should not receive this luxury. This raised the question of its meaning and purpose in a prison setting.

Physical fitness is a very serious issue in prison. One day I came upon "Old Doc" sitting at a table in a cell-block yard. He had a blood pressure machine and in front of him was a line of ten or fifteen older inmates waiting to be checked. I asked Doc what this was all about. He explained that he was chairman of the prison senior citizen health project and further stated, "I'm just trying to keep these old fellows healthy so they don't die before their release date."

Paul Tillich once wrote that the fear of dying is related to our fear of being forgotten – the fear of "nothingness." He suggested that the reason we put so many big monuments above the earth after death is because we fear being forgotten. I believe that men and women who come to prison with long sentences have already experienced this. They have experienced the fear of death or the fear of being forgotten as the result of being separated from family, friends and society. Because this has already been experienced it compounds the fear of dying while doing time.

There are many other reasons that make physical fitness a serious issue. One prisoner stated that if he stays healthy so that he lives ten years longer it's like cutting his sentence in half. Another feels that you can't have a sound mind if you do not have a sound body. Physical activity offers a person an opportunity to create discipline and commitment. He also added, "You want to look better when you leave than when you came in."

Another concern related to "working out" is the control of anger and stress. Prisons are very stressful places and there are not many avenues for the release of the tension they produce.

One pastor who works with former prisoners commented on the unusual number of stress-related illnesses that afflict men who have served long sentences. These often occur just a few years after release.

A final major concern is the fear of becoming mentally ill. This is a fear of losing control of one's being and becoming a victim of the system and/or other prisoners. Many believe that a sound body is directly related to a sound mind. Needless to say, physical fitness and well-being are very serious issues in almost every prison.