

ELEVEN

HARD WON LESSONS

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“Man, I’ve got to go to the bathroom so bad, but Dad is on the couch and he’ll get me!” He’s lying there watching TV as I force myself to calmly walk past him. I am trying to be invisible. Just as I get within reach of his arms I break into a sprint, but he is faster and his swat to the butt gets me anyway. He’s so big and strong that my six-year-old body bows backwards as it hurdles forward.

Right now I’m in an orange prison uniform sitting at a desk in a cell of the Wyoming Women’s Center. It should be called Wyoming Women’s *Prison*. Do not get confused by the word “Center.” It is a prison. People see “Center” in its name and get a glossed-over idea that it’s not really prison.

Prison is meant to keep you away from life as you knew it. You don’t get to be with your family. You don’t get to raise your kids, or go grocery shopping, or drive your car, or use your cell phone. No career, no home, no vacations, no having babies (my personal sorrow), no going to graduations. You do not get to attend any family weddings, nor do you get to attend funerals. You do not get to be actively involved with the lives of your loved ones. In fact, you do not get to be actively involved with life at all. This is the purpose of incarceration: to excise you from the outside world.

When you wake up in prison, you do the same things every day. Here, we have a snarky title for the monotony of prison life: Groundhog Day, like the movie with Bill Murray, except he has a lot more fun than we do with all his shenanigans. Now, before I go much further, I want to also be clear about something else: WWC is not, I repeat *not*, like the prisons you see on “Locked Down” or “Locked Up Abroad.” Those places are extreme, which is why they make good television. WWC would not make good television.

In fact, a staff member here once told me that they sometimes refer to this place as “Prisoneland.” That also might be a bit extreme, but try to form a mental picture of something in-between and you will have a better idea of what this prison is like.

We do not have fights every day or have to worry about getting raped or “shanked.” Yes, there have been some fights over the years but nobody has ever been shanked here (not that it couldn’t happen, but I pray it never does). I have never heard of anyone being sexually assaulted here but I must say, as inmates, we are stripped of our right to consent. So any sexual activity is defined as sexual assault. The point is, this “Center” is prison and being in prison sucks, but if you have to be in prison this is not such a bad place to be. There are a lot of worse places.

“It’s your turn to ask him!” whined my older brother. I take a deep breath, knowing that he’s right. He goes with me to the front porch where Dad is fixing a step. I’m scared ‘cause I know he’s gonna yell at me. It’s summer in Texas so it’s extremely hot and it’s only noon. Mom is at Nursing school. If she were here we could ask her. “Dad?” I’m trying to not show fear. He gets annoyed if he sees me being scared. “What?” He sounds annoyed already. “Can we eat lunch?” My heart is pounding. “I don’t care.” Immediately I’m relieved. My brother and I take off running to get the other kids, excited that he didn’t get mad.

This isn’t a story about prison life nor is it a mitigating tale about the events leading up to my crime in an effort to get you to understand me. In fact, if it weren’t pertinent to what I have to say here, I wouldn’t bring up the sins of the past at all. I didn’t write this to express to you my woes or use this as a means of catharsis.

I have done that already. Some of it has been pointless – me just spinning my wheels. Some of it has been very good. All of it is vital to the process of changing my life.

I write this because I have to. I have learned too much from the wrongs that I have done to just keep it to myself. My crimes were terrible for my victims, their family, my own family, and the community where it happened. It would remain a gaping wound, a black hole of regret and pain in our lives if we left the event as

only what it was: terrible. It would drain us of health and happiness, leaving us a sad waste of humanity. That cannot be the lasting result of my terrible sin. I won't let it be.

There is nothing I can do to make things right again. We have all heard someone who's made a terrible mistake ask, "How can I make it right?" I believe my own victims would be appalled and angrily offended to hear me ask that question. I certainly would be. I have been a victim and if the man who hurt me said that I would want to punch his lights out. No, there is nothing anybody could do to make it right. However, what we can do is let God cause good things to come from our offenses. That is my prayer.

This leads me to my first hard won lesson: everything does *not* happen for a reason. Anybody who's ever been a victim would balk if they heard their abuser say, "This happened for a reason." Oh man, do I disagree with that statement. It is one way of anesthetizing ourselves to the pain our iniquity causes.

Usually you hear it from some well-meaning person trying to make you feel better after you've lamented about your misdeeds. And I usually respond by vehemently saying, "No, this did not happen for a reason. I did not commit my crime for a reason and God didn't let this happen for a reason. What reason could it have been, so that I could learn a lesson? Or, worse yet, so my victims could learn a lesson?" The well-meaning person might then ask, "You don't think God does things for a reason?"

Whoa, stop right there. God didn't do this and He didn't want me to do this. My crimes are not an indicator of God's will in my life. He celebrates good choices and mourns the bad ones, but He gave us the right to make our own decisions. God is a good Father and, just like our earthly fathers should do, He works to lead us in the right direction and stop us from making poor decisions. We are not puppets on a string. He works in our lives when we let Him.

The emotional salve we are looking for is that God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love the Lord, and are called accordingly to his purpose (Romans 8:28). This

means that when we submit ourselves to Him, He will bring us back into right standing with Him.

I bet Mom is sad today. She has to drive around all by herself to her patients' houses. I wish I could be with her. God, please help Mom not be sad and lonely. I hate having to stay here with Dad and the kids when Mom's out there by herself. She needs me. I'm old enough, I could help her! Please, God, help my Mom since I couldn't go with her.

As you can tell, I am a believer. My parents took us to church regularly and I loved it. Without a doubt I know that God loves me and by grace I am saved. It's that "by grace" part that I have learned the most about, through this whole crime and incarceration business. Grace was an obscure, ethereal concept before. I understood it logically but if you were to ask me to explain it as it applies to my life I would not have been able to, except of course, by Jesus' death on the cross. Now, however, I see grace clearly.

The best way to define grace in my life is to tell you about the two wonderful people God has given me. Their names are Charlie and Cheri. When I first met Charlie I felt petite, and trust me when I tell you that I am not. I'm just shy of 5'9" and, in 2007, 150ish pounds. I walked up to where Charlie was sitting in the Visiting Room to greet him and when he stood up it was as if he sprouted from the chair and reached the sky like Jack's beanstalk. I had to lean back a little just to be able to look up at him. I had already known Cheri for several years by this time. I should have asked her what he looked like to prepare myself. Granted I see male officers every day, it had been a while since I had been in close proximity to a "real" man. Male officers are real men, I know, but I cannot view them as such. They are officers, therefore they are cogs in the machine: impersonal, un-relatable, borderline inhuman, here to do a job and keep us from strangling each other. Okay, so that might be a bit of an exaggeration of my true feelings because I do care for several of them, but suffice it to say that it is unwise to see officers, male or female, in a social light.

Charlie is actually only 6'2'' – still tall but not extremely so. I think I was just surprised to walk up and greet a normal man, watch him unfold himself to stand head and shoulders above me, to shake his hand and... Wait, I must stop here. After the surprise of how tall he was I have to say that I was shocked at the size of his hands. That man shook my hand and I felt a moment of anxiety when my hand disappeared into his. It was like he was wearing meat gloves. His hands were so muscular that even his fingers had muscles. How is that possible? I was immediately fascinated. So after we sat down and spent a few minutes getting acquainted, I asked about his hands. He turned them over, palm up, to reveal a working man's hands: ragged nails, creased with grease, smelling of gasoline. When was the last time I smelled gasoline? To my amazement, it was refreshing. It made me think of being out of prison, of the outside world. I even asked if I could smell them. Apparently, he washed his hands in the stuff to remove the grease they were coated in from working on their property's windmills. They are ranchers, real salt of the earth kind of people and they are my god-family.

Charlie and Cheri (pronounced like "sherry") are 78 this year. He is a gentle giant: quiet, unassuming, peace-loving, and hard-working. Cheri is his perfect compliment: a petite German woman with grit in her soul, as tough as Charlie is gentle. They have been coming in to visit me for several years. God has put them in my life to show me grace, to help me heal, and to demonstrate a different way to live.

Ugh, I hate this house! Moving here is the worst decision Mom and Dad ever made. This house is practically falling down around us. Plus, we're out in the middle of nowhere. They fight all the time, mostly because Dad can't find work and Mom spends too much money. He's been watching me, too, when he doesn't think I notice. He gets into bed with me to go back to sleep after Mom leaves for work and I can't stand it. It's disgusting but he acts like there's nothing wrong with it and gets mad if I try to get up. I live in constant fear that he'll try to touch me again. It makes me sick.

You see, my “real” families live in Texas. I say “families” because I have two sets of parents and siblings: bio, half, and step. I was alone up here in Wyoming, except for the man I committed my crime with (my boyfriend at the time), and being alone in this state makes you feel as though you’ve stepped off the map. It is lonely even in prison. Maybe, especially in prison. You would be surprised at the number of people who do not know that Wyoming is a state. I must admit, to my embarrassment, that I didn’t know until my boyfriend and I drove into it back in 1996. I thought it was a city. Ridiculous, huh?

My families are good to me and I miss them very much. I grew up with my Mom, stepdad (who I call Dad), two siblings from their marriage and sometimes my two step-siblings from his first marriage. Dad was a tyrant and Mom was codependent. Our family was what I call “normally dysfunctional.” By that I mean that all families have issues. They range from “I had a great childhood” to “I may have lived through it but I wish I hadn’t.” Our family would probably fall somewhere on the wrong side of middle.

I can hardly believe it; he wants to be around me all the time. He protects me, even from Dad. He loves me! This must be what everybody talks about when they talk about being in love. I can’t believe he loves me. No wonder this is such a big deal to people. He must be the man God wants me to be with. I prayed to marry a man that has some of the same amazing characteristics my brothers have and he’s got both their names! His first and middle names are their names. Amazing! That has to be a sign that he’s the man God wants me to marry.

My family of origin was far away in Texas, and until several years into my prison sentence, I didn’t have a relationship with my father and his family. This lack of meaningful relationships left me a very broken girl in a tiny prison in the least populated state with nothing and no one. Broken down, hopeless, and ashamed, by the time I got to prison, I didn’t even have myself.

In 2003 I met Cheri. She was assigned to me as a community mentor by a privatized halfway house that I applied to in preparation for a hearing with the Parole Board. The whole process is complicated and unnecessary for the purpose of this story, so suffice it to say, it is not a normal occurrence for a long-term inmate to have a mentor from the community. In fact, it is very rare. It is evident to me now that God placed her in my life for a purpose.

I told her upfront about my crimes so that she wasn't going into our friendship unaware of what I had done. Plus, I thought that if she was going to "fall off," it needed to be sooner rather than later. People sometimes do that, they fall off the face of the Earth, so it seems. All of a sudden they stop coming to visit and stop accepting your phone calls, mostly because a husband has found someone new, or your family and friends assume that you know they love you but they're too busy to write, or worse, they decided it's just too hard on them emotionally. It's heartbreaking to us inmates because it gives life to the phrase, "out of sight, out of mind." I tried to avoid that heartbreak and I thought that if she heard about my crimes they might have been a deciding factor for her. She didn't fall off, though. She came back and she kept coming back. For a long time I was surprised every time I would hear, "874 to Visiting."

What a treat she was: always kind and glad to see me. I was amazed that God made people like that. What made her want to come into a prison and visit a woman who had committed a violent crime against an older couple, especially since she was older, too? I could hardly believe it. We had such sweet visits. She'd tell me about her family, how she volunteered at the Senior Center, about their ranch and the cows. For some reason, I especially liked hearing about the cows. I like cows. Don't judge.

I told her about what it was like in prison and she was genuinely fascinated by prison life, which was interesting to me. It was the first time in my life that I had the benefit of someone giving me that much undivided attention and sincerely listening to what I had to say. When I was a child people were annoyed when I

spoke. As a teenager what I said didn't count. Once I became an offender *everything* I said was "used against" me. When you're a convict, the only people who care about what you say are your family, if you haven't screwed up too many times. Being listened to is an amazing gift and Cheri gave that to me.

The first couple of years her visits were infrequent and short. Charlie would drop her off and then drive around town, waiting to pick her up at a specified time. Then, in 2005, I was transferred to a Texas facility along with several other ladies to make room for the expansion of WWC.

When I was in Texas, my "real" families came to visit me often and it was great. My mom took nursing jobs close to the facility so that she and my dad could visit frequently and we were able to experience a good healing process. My biological father and his family also came to visit and we began to develop relationships. Up to that point, we had only exchanged letters a few times a year.

Another hard won lesson: Time equals relationship, meaning that the more time you spend with someone the more bonds you build with them. Oftentimes, relationships develop by default, simply because of the time you spend with each other. That applies to any kind of relationship. These decisions should be made with a conscientious effort.

Cheri and I wrote back and forth for a little while I was there and, in 2007, when I came back to WWC, she was right back in here to visit. I was very surprised when I heard my number called to Visiting. I had even forgot that Cheri was still on my approved Visitors' List. I walked into the room and there she was with a smile and a hug for me. Wow, I was amazed again that God made people like her. What in the world did I do to deserve her in my life?

It was later that year when Charlie started coming in with Cheri to visit me and then they started coming in more often – about every two or three weeks. They were so kind, attentive, and welcoming that it was easy to love them.

Charlie and Cheri and their entire brood actually, adopted me as one of their own. Likewise, they are part of my family, one that God has given me, to help mold me into the woman that He wants me to be. I now think of them as part of my “real” family. The only difference is that Charlie and Cheri *chose* to be a part of my life, and that choice is as strong a bond as blood. They are grace personified; a walking, talking example of what God intended when He gave us grace.

Hard won lesson: Love is a choice and that choice is a privilege. Use it wisely. Treasure it. Remember, though, as with anything of value, love needs to be cared for correctly. I am blessed beyond measure by the people that God has allowed me to have in my life. This world would be a different place; prison would be a different animal if all inmates had such people in their lives.

Oh God, I can't believe this is happening. They are terrified. They're terrified of me! I can't make myself look at them in the eye, but I can see that they are afraid that we will hurt them. They're so quiet and they keep looking at each other. I just don't want to be doing this! I wish they could see that! Just don't show fear, Darla. That will only make it worse. I don't want to hold this gun, but he told me to. Maybe if I talk to them they'll see that I'm not evil. All they see is me holding a gun. How is this happening? Please, don't think that I'm evil. I'm not really evil, I promise! I don't want to be doing this, but I don't know what else to do!

At my sentencing, the judge told me that I was selfish. He said many things to me actually, but I only remember that one point. To paraphrase, I put the lives of other people in jeopardy because I was being self-absorbed. I was so consumed with keeping the man I was with from getting mad at me that I participated in victimizing two innocent people. That is selfishness and cowardice at its worst.

Well, this is not about me anymore. I made this about me for too long. It's about them and the other people like me who haven't hurt “them” yet. Most importantly, it's about keeping that from happening. I do still wonder how this happened, to tell you

the truth. How did I get here? Wait... there's that 'I' again. Man, it's hard not to make it about me. Stop this! I'm here because my decisions got me here, and how did I do that? By making everything about me.

What do people say that insanity is? Doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result. I'm not so sure. I've been in prison long enough to see insanity in people, and by my definition, it's unpredictable, but I digress. The point is, I keep doing the same things hoping that one day things will turn out okay.

I really don't want this to be about me anymore. Prison fosters that notion, by the way. Me, me, me... We come here and the staff says, "This is the only time in your adult life that you'll get this kind of *opportunity*: to focus on *you* and change *your* life." This may be true, but the underside to that silver lining is that it encourages self-centeredness. I don't know about you, but when I committed my crimes, I was being completely, 100%, deplorably self-centered. Not that I recognized that at the time. In fact, when I was told that by my judge at my sentencing, I was shocked and wanted desperately to defend myself. For years afterward, I still wanted to explain things and help people understand what I was feeling. I wasn't *trying* to be selfish at all, I was trying to...

And the defensiveness begins. Hard won lesson: Intention is meaningless unless it is followed by action. It doesn't matter that I didn't *intend* to harm people. My intention was one thing, but my actions were another. It is my actions for which I am in prison. There is no defending what I did to be in prison, however, if you want to know what and why, I will tell you. But please, if morbid curiosity is why you want to know, don't ask. I may be in a cage, but I'm not a sideshow exhibit. If you would like to understand, because my crime is so incongruous with what you see in me today, I would be obliged to talk to you about it. Yes, it will hurt and is still shameful, but I believe that it would be a terrible waste and dishonor to the victims of my crime if I didn't share the wisdom that I have gained from it.

“Are you ready?” he asks as he looks at me, holding the gun between his knees. I know what he means. He is going to commit “suicide by cop” and take me with him. He told me once that he would never go back to jail, that he would go down shooting first. Crying, I say, “I don’t want to die.” On the inside I am begging him not to do it. He takes a deep breath and time stands still. I cannot allow myself to think about what will happen next. This moment is electric with terror. I can’t breathe and I almost wish my body would explode just to get this over with. Slowly, like time hesitates to restart itself, he sets the gun on the floorboard and lifts his hands in the air. I do the same. Both truck doors get ripped open by the cops that have surrounded the vehicle. We are yanked to the ground.

Do you ever wonder what makes inmates with long sentences keep going every day? What make us simply not give up? I mean, let’s be real here: the outside world hates us. We are the lowest of the low. We cannot be trusted around normal people. We are different, less-than. Right?

That might be a bit harsh. It may not be exactly what everybody thinks, but there are people out there who do think this, especially victims. I don’t blame them; I would think that too if some crazy person kidnapped my grandparents, which is what I did. I would want justice. I would want the offender to suffer.

I recently watched a movie that shook me to my core. It was *Secret in Their Eyes* with Julia Roberts. In the movie, Roberts’ daughter is brutally raped and murdered. The offender goes free because he is acting as a snitch for the Counter Terrorism Team, of which Roberts’ character is a member. The crime gets covered up by law enforcement. Thirteen years later, it is discovered that Roberts’ character had captured that offender on her own, and kept him all those years in a prison cell that she built. She reasoned that since the “law,” her own coworkers, refused to convict and sentence this monster who so brutally killed her daughter, she would do it herself. Who could blame her for feeling that way? Roberts’ character created a prison for the man who destroyed

what was most precious in her life, but the sentence she enforced imprisoned her as well, and crushed what was left of her spirit.

This movie caused me so much angst. I would understand it if my victims had similar feelings towards me. I wondered why the offender in the movie kept going. Why would he, after 13 years of hopeless captivity, keep waking up each morning? I don't compare my circumstances with his, but the same questions apply. What keeps us going every day and why do we keep trying? The simplistic answer is this: nature's law of self-preservation. Whether our living situation is good or bad, we keep waking up each morning because Life requires us to. Life wants to survive, and it matters very little how we feel about it. This is why the offender in the movie was still alive after so many years of an abysmal existence. This is what we call survival mode and a frightful amount of people know too well what it's like.

Many 'lifers' exist in a version of survival mode. We wake up each morning and we do the next thing. We brush our teeth, go to work, watch TV, maybe hangout with friends. We simply do the thing that comes next. On the whole, that is why we keep going. We have to; our life makes us. I consider this to be living by default. This is a concept that I read about in a book several years ago. You deal with whatever is in front of you and hope something good comes out of it. I'll use an experience of my own as an example. My boyfriend said that he would take care of us. We were on the run with very little money and no definite direction. I was scared. I missed my family and felt terrible guilt for running out on them. We were fugitives from the Texas law. We had committed several incredibly stupid crimes in Texas. Instead of making my own decisions for my life, I let my boyfriend do it. He told me that he would get us out of the mess we were in and since I didn't know what to do, it was easier to let him figure it out.

From that I learned one of the hardest won lessons: Make your own choices. No matter who leads the way, you will participate in paying the consequences in the end. Letting other people choose for you does not let you off the hook. Silence is consent.

Think about it this way: you purchase a new computer and it comes with default settings, correct? Do you change the settings? If you don't, are you content with what's available? On a computer, this is not a big deal, but how about your relationships? Who sets the tone of your relationships and makes decisions? Do you, like a river, follow the path of least resistance?

God, please don't let me wake up in the morning. I can't do this. This is my worst nightmare come true. The whole world hates me; they really do think that I'm evil. I know what I did was evil, but I am not! Please help everybody see that. I didn't mean to hurt anybody. I'm so sorry for what we did. This hurts too much. Why did You let this happen, God? You could have stopped us or saved me and saved them from all the terror we put them through. I know I shouldn't love him anymore. Oh my God, please make this stop, it's too much. Please, just don't let me wake up.

At the beginning of my incarceration I had to make a decision between suicide and surrender. It was a very real and practical decision to make, it seemed. Anyone who has ever been in the depths of darkness will understand. I must admit that the main reason why I didn't commit suicide was my mother. I knew that it would take the life from her too. She had already been through enough because of me. So once I decided that death wasn't an option, I cried out to God and told Him that I gave up. I said to Him, "Apparently, I suck at life, Lord. I don't know how to do this right. So please take it. My life is now garbage and there is literally nothing that I can do with it. You can have it. I'm so sorry to be giving You my life after I have messed it up so badly, but if You want it, You can have it. I hope You can make something out of it."

After that decision came the determination that I would not be defeated by prison or what I had done here. I refused to allow this to be the sum total of my life. These walls and fences keep me here, but the health of my life and its effectiveness is not limited or confined by them.

My old band teacher from the eighth grade taught us: "Practice how you're going to perform, because you will perform

how you practice.” Hard won lesson: Yesterday was practice for today’s performance and today for tomorrow’s. Each day I practice spending freedom, and life, well. My freedom from prison will come one day. Choose life and then do something with it.

I have one main message to every woman as they walk out the doors of this prison: Do good things. I don’t say, “Good luck!” I don’t believe in luck. I believe in choices, and I believe in God. That is my message to you. Take whatever happened yesterday and let it make you better. Move forward, enjoy your days, love your people well, and do good things.