

Wellness from Death Row: Staying Human in a Place Built for Death

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Introduction

We need to start by telling you what this book is not.

It is not a book about death row. It is not a true crime narrative, a memoir of suffering, or an argument about capital punishment. It is a wellness guide. The fact that it was born inside one of the most restrictive and psychologically brutal environments a human being can occupy is precisely the point...because if the practices we are going to describe work there, they will work anywhere. Including wherever you are right now.

One of us is a spiritual advisor who has spent years accompanying incarcerated people through the hardest passages of their lives. One of us has spent more than two decades on death row, building...against every conceivable pressure...a life of extraordinary interior freedom. Together, we have had hundreds of hours of conversation about what it actually takes to stay well. Not well in the spa-weekend sense. Well in the sense of remaining a whole human being when your circumstances are doing everything they can to reduce you to something less.

Those conversations produced this book.

Reframing Wellness

Wellness, as it is most commonly sold, is a product. It arrives in the form of expensive equipment, subscription services, curated meal plans and retreats designed to help you find yourself over a long weekend. Embedded in all of it is a quiet and corrosive assumption: that wellness is something you

access when you have enough money, enough time and enough comfort to make it a priority.

We reject that assumption entirely.

Real wellness...the kind that holds when your life falls apart, the kind that keeps you human when your circumstances are trying to make you something less...has nothing to do with any of those things. It is, at its core, a daily practice of remaining whole inside whatever container your life has placed you in. It requires no equipment. It requires no particular income. It requires no external validation and no favorable conditions.

What it requires is decision. Repeated daily. In exactly the circumstances you actually have.

One of us makes that decision every morning in a cell the size of a parking space, in a facility whose institutional purpose is eventual execution. He has been making it for over twenty years. The practices he has developed in that time...around his body, his mind, his relationships and his spirit...are not theoretical. They have been tested under conditions most people will never face and they have held.

That is the proof of concept this book rests on.

Why Death Row

You might reasonably ask why a wellness book should come from death row. The answer is the same reason stress-test engineers push a bridge far past normal load before they certify it safe for traffic: extreme conditions reveal what holds and what doesn't. Most wellness practices are designed for people who already have the basics...safety, food, community, autonomy. Strip all of those away, as death row does and you

learn very quickly which practices were luxuries and which were necessities.

What we found, through years of conversation and reflection, is that the necessities are surprisingly few. And they are available to everyone.

There is also an honesty that comes from the extreme. In a place where there is no performance to maintain, no career to protect, no social image to curate, a man eventually gets very clear about what actually works and what he was only pretending worked. That clarity is one of the most valuable things we can offer you. The wellness practices in this book have not been filtered through marketing departments or focus groups. They have been filtered through the lived experience of a man with nothing to gain from telling you anything other than the truth.

The Four Pillars

Throughout this book, we will return to four organizing principles that emerged from years of practice in conditions of radical deprivation. We did not begin with these principles and then find evidence for them. We began with the evidence...with what actually kept a man well in a place designed to destroy him...and found that the evidence organized itself naturally into four categories.

We call them the four pillars: **simplicity**, **reflection**, **connection** and **purpose**.

Simplicity is the practice of stripping life down to what is essential. Not as an aesthetic choice and not because circumstances have taken everything else...though in some cases they have...but because the noise of a modern life, left unmanaged, drowns out the signal of your actual existence.

Most people are so overwhelmed by what is unnecessary that they can barely hear what is real. Simplicity is not poverty. It is discernment.

Reflection is the practice of looking honestly at where you are, who you have been and who you intend to become. It is not rumination, which circles the same painful territory without resolution. It is not self-criticism for its own sake. It is the deliberate act of sitting with yourself ...with your choices, your patterns, your losses, your strengths...without flinching and then deciding, on the basis of what you see, what comes next.

Connection is the practice of building and sustaining relationships that hold you when everything else gives way. Not networks. Not followings. Relationships...the kind built on genuine knowledge of each other, sustained through effort and attention over years, capable of surviving silence and distance and disagreement. These relationships are built the same way in a cell as they are in a suburb: slowly, through accumulated honesty and the willingness to show up when it would be easier not to.

Purpose is what emerges when the other three are in place. Not a mission statement. Not a brand. The daily sense that what you are doing today has some bearing on something larger than your immediate comfort...that your life is aimed at something and that the aim is yours. Purpose does not require grand ambition. It requires only that you know, each morning, why you are getting up.

These four pillars, practiced daily under conditions of extraordinary deprivation, constitute a life well lived. We believe they can do the same for you, under whatever conditions you currently face.

A Word About Paul

Paul has been on death row for more than two decades, incarcerated for something he maintains he did not do. He maintains, by any observable measure, a level of psychological health, relational depth and purposeful engagement with life that most people living in full freedom never achieve. He is not a saint. He will tell you that himself, at length, without prompting. He is a man who did the work...not because he had good options, but because he understood, early and clearly, that doing the work was the only option that led anywhere worth going.

His insights are not the only ones in this book. We have drawn on a wide range of sources...philosophy, neuroscience, spiritual traditions and the accumulated wisdom of many people who have faced extreme circumstances and come through them with their humanity intact. But his life is the animating example. When we describe what is possible, he is what we mean.

How to Read This Book

This book is organized around five domains of wellness...body, mind, heart, spirit and practice...followed by a practical section designed to help you translate these principles into your daily life.

At the end of each chapter, you will find a brief section called **The Practice**. These are not optional extras. They are the point. A book about wellness that leaves you only with ideas has not done its job. These practices are small, concrete and available to anyone regardless of resources, schedule, or circumstances. They are the minimum effective dose of each chapter's central insight.

This book was not written to make you feel better for an afternoon. It was written to change the way you live. We offer it in that spirit.

Paul Everett

Jeff Hood

Part I: The Body...Holding Ground in Confinement

The body is the first territory.

Before the mind can do its work...before reflection is possible, before connection can be sustained, before purpose can be felt...the body has to be claimed. Not perfected. Not optimized. Claimed. There is a difference between a body you inhabit and a body you endure. Most people in difficult circumstances begin to endure their bodies: treating the physical self as a burden to be managed, a source of discomfort to be numbed, a vehicle that is slowly failing and cannot be expected to do much about it.

That posture is a slow surrender and it costs more than most people realize.

The chapters in this section explore what it means to maintain genuine physical wellness in conditions of severe restriction...and what that practice reveals about the relationship between the body, the environment and the interior life. The lessons that emerge from a death row cell are, in this domain perhaps more than any other, immediately applicable to the body you live in right now.

Chapter 1: Concrete and Breath

The Engineered Environment

Every environment you live in is, to some degree, engineered. Your city was designed. Your home was designed. Your office was designed. The apps on your phone were designed....and designed, specifically, to produce predictable effects in your nervous system. Most people move through these engineered spaces without ever stopping to ask a basic question: *What is this place trying to make me feel and do I want to feel that?*

Death row makes this question impossible to avoid. The environment there is engineered with rare directness. The lighting is institutional...never quite right for sustained thought or genuine rest. The sound is calibrated to interrupt. The space is measured precisely enough to allow movement but not freedom. Every element is part of a system whose purpose is declared in its name: it is the place where people are held until they are killed. When the environment is that explicit about its intentions, you either figure out how to maintain your interior life in spite of them, or the place wins.

Paul figured it out early and his framing is instructive: he calls it the Department of Punishment, not the Department of Correction. The distinction matters. Correction implies a purpose beyond confinement...rehabilitation, change, preparation for a different future. Punishment implies none of that. It implies only that the environment's function is to make life harder. Naming that accurately was his first act of

resistance, because you cannot push back against something you have not named.

This is the first physical lesson of this chapter and it applies far beyond death row: *you cannot take care of your body in an environment you have not examined.* Most people have not examined theirs. They have absorbed it instead...taken on its rhythms, its pace, its quality of rest and wakefulness...without ever questioning whether those rhythms serve them or deplete them. The environment shapes the body. The body shapes the mind. The mind shapes the life. If you want to change any part of that chain, you have to start by looking honestly at the environment you are actually in.

What does your home do to your nervous system at the end of a long day? What does your workplace do to your breathing? What does your phone, picked up first thing in the morning before your feet touch the floor, do to the quality of your first hour? These are not rhetorical questions. They have measurable answers and those answers matter enormously.

The Architecture of Isolation

The death row cell is approximately six feet wide and nine feet long. There is a bunk bolted to the wall, a toilet, a sink and a small surface that functions as a desk. The window, when present, cannot be opened. The temperature is not adjustable. The light cannot be dimmed.

For the first two decades of his incarceration, Paul spent approximately twenty-two hours of every day inside that space, with the remaining time...divided into two brief weekly sessions...available for outdoor recreation. For extended stretches, the cell had a solid steel door rather than bars,

reducing even the ambient stimulation of the wing to near nothing.

And yet, by his own consistent account, he did not experience the fundamental aloneness that the architecture seemed designed to produce. This is not a claim about the absence of loneliness as a passing feeling...loneliness visited him as it visits everyone. It is a claim about his fundamental sense of belonging in the world. The cell contained his body. It did not contain his belonging.

He maintained...through letters, through phone calls, through a deliberate architecture of relationships built over years....a network of people for whom he was present and who were present for him. Certain people on the outside knew that if they didn't hear from him within a specific period of time, they would begin asking questions. That accountability was not a function of physical proximity. It was a function of investment made long before the walls went up and continuously renewed across them.

The lesson this offers is uncomfortable for many people living in apparent freedom to sit with. Physical isolation and the experience of aloneness are not the same thing. You can be surrounded by people...family, coworkers, hundreds of social media contacts....and be profoundly, structurally alone. You can be in a six-by-nine cell and be genuinely connected. The difference is not circumstantial. It is relational. It is the product of having built, over time, the kind of bonds that survive distance and silence and inconvenience.

Consider the question his experience raises directly: if you went silent for seventy-two hours...no posts, no texts, no calls...who would notice and who would act on the noticing?

Not who might wonder. Who would actually reach out? If that number is small, you may be living in a form of isolation that no amount of external activity is masking. The solution is not more activity. The solution is the slower, harder work of genuine connection, which we will address at length in Part III.

Sound, Rest and What You Let In

Death row is largely quiet. This surprises most people. The cinematic version...constant noise, chaos, aggression...is not the reality. What is real is a particular pattern of interruption that repeats with metronomic regularity every thirty minutes around the clock.

Every half hour, a corrections officer makes rounds. The radio on their hip carries whatever transmissions come through...loud enough to cut through sleep. The front door of the wing opens. Then the back door opens and is held for fifteen to twenty seconds. Then it closes. This sequence repeats every thirty minutes, every night, for years.

The effect, experienced over decades, is a form of rest deprivation that operates not through sleep prevention but through the systematic prevention of deep rest. The body never fully settles. Sleep is taken in fragments, each one cut short before the deepest restorative phases are reached.

The adaptation developed in response is practical and immediately useful: homemade blindfolds and earplugs. Conditions that the body can actually rest in, manufactured from whatever is available, regardless of what the institution sends through every half hour. The institution was not going to provide adequate rest conditions. So adequate rest conditions had to be built.

Your sleep environment almost certainly contains its own version of the thirty-minute interruption. The phone glowing on the nightstand. The television left on in the next room. The notifications, the streaming shows, the ambient hum of a life that never quite goes quiet. None of these are as severe as what we have just described. But the principle they violate is identical: rest requires conditions and those conditions are...to a significant degree...within your control to create.

Deciding what enters the room where you sleep is an act of self-determination, not a minor preference. It is a decision about your nervous system, your cognitive function the following day, your emotional regulation and your physical recovery. Most people have abdicated this decision entirely, letting the default conditions of their overscheduled lives set the terms of their rest. The cost is paid every single day in energy not restored, in clarity not achieved, in patience not available.

Beyond sleep, there is a broader question about quiet...not just the absence of sound, but the interior condition of settledness in which you can actually hear your own thoughts. Most people in the contemporary world have not inhabited that kind of quiet in years. The arrangements of daily life are often, without conscious intention, organized around its avoidance. The moment of waking is immediately filled with the phone. The commute is filled with the podcast. Every gap that quiet might occupy gets filled, because quiet has started to feel...and this is the word people actually use when pressed...*dangerous*.

Quiet feels dangerous because we have lost the practice of inhabiting it. And we have lost the practice because inhabiting

it requires us to be present with ourselves...with our actual thoughts, our actual condition, our actual life...without the buffer of constant stimulation. For many people, that unmediated meeting with themselves has been deferred so long that its prospect has become genuinely frightening.

The irony is that the self waiting in the quiet is not as frightening as the avoidance of it. The anxiety most people carry is not produced by silence. It is produced by the accumulated weight of everything avoided by staying loud. Sit in the quiet long enough and most of that weight becomes manageable. Not immediately, not painlessly, but progressively...and predictably, for anyone willing to try it.

Breath as the First Claim

Six years ago, when tablets became available in the facility and audio recordings became accessible, a deliberate breathing practice began. Body scans, primarily. Three different recordings in regular rotation. Every day, or as close to every day as the rhythms of institutional life allowed. A deliberate turning of attention toward the body's most fundamental act...and the slow reclamation of that act as a place of interior sovereignty.

After six years of near-daily practice, the description of its function is simple: *it's how I come back to myself*. When the noise has been working on the mind, when the day has been heavy, the breath practice is the reset. The return to a baseline that the environment cannot ultimately touch.

The breath is unique among the body's functions because it is the only one that is simultaneously automatic and voluntary. The heart beats without your participation. Digestion happens without your permission. But the breath responds to your

attention. You can slow it, deepen it, hold it. And when you stop paying attention, it continues on its own...steady, unhurried, indifferent to whether you choose to notice it or not.

This makes the breath the hinge between what you control and what controls you. It is, as virtually every contemplative tradition across human history has recognized, the point of entry into the interior life. Not because it is magic...it is not. But because it is always available, always honest and always present in a way that nothing external to you can match.

When practiced deliberately, breath awareness does something specific and measurable: it brings the mind back into the body. Much of the anxiety that plagues modern life is, at its physiological root, a nervous system that has been running in low-grade emergency mode for so long that it has forgotten what regulation feels like. Slow, deliberate breathing...particularly extended exhalation...directly signals the parasympathetic nervous system, the part of your autonomic nervous system responsible for rest and recovery. This is not metaphor. It is biology. The breath is a lever you can reach without any equipment, at any moment of any day.

In a place where almost nothing is available without institutional permission, the breath requires none. It was the first territory that could be claimed without asking. That is worth sitting with for a moment: even in the most controlled environment human beings have designed for one another, the breath remains sovereign. The state cannot regulate it. The institution cannot confiscate it. It belongs, entirely, to the person breathing.

If you have more freedom than that...and most of you reading this do...then you have more territory available to you than you are currently claiming. The breath is where that claiming begins.

The Practice: Sixty Seconds

Before you continue to the next chapter, stop.

Find a position in which your spine is reasonably upright. Place one hand on your chest. Close your eyes.

Breathe in through your nose for a count of four. Hold for a count of two. Breathe out through your mouth for a count of six.

Do this five times. That is sixty seconds.

Notice what, if anything, changed. If you felt nothing, you were thinking about something else. Try again, this time directing your full attention to the physical sensation of air entering and leaving your body.

This is not a meditation practice requiring special conditions or spiritual preparation. It is a reset...a sixty-second reclamation of your body's most basic and most available function. Do it every morning before you look at your phone. Do it in your car before you go into work. Do it in any moment when you feel the environment beginning to win.

Do it every day for thirty days. Then evaluate whether sixty seconds was a reasonable investment.

Chapter 2: Movement in a Cage

The Body as an Act of Will

A cell is not built for movement. It is built for containment. Every dimension...the square footage, the bolted furniture, the narrow corridor between bunk and wall...assumes that stillness is the natural state and movement the interruption. A man who accepts that assumption will find his body reflecting it within a few years: stiffening, weakening, losing the range and resilience that bodies lose when they are not asked to work.

A man who refuses that assumption has to become creative.

The story of physical maintenance on death row is, at its core, a story about creativity under constraint. It is the story of someone who decided that the unavailability of a gym, a track, equipment, a trainer, or even adequate space was not a reason to stop moving. It is the story of more than twenty years of daily invention...of finding, in a space smaller than most people's bathrooms, a full and demanding physical practice that maintained function, health and competitive capacity well into middle age.

We tell this story not because we expect your circumstances to resemble a death row cell. We tell it because almost everyone reading this book has, at some point, used the unavailability of something...a gym membership, a running partner, the right equipment, enough time, a better neighborhood...as a reason not to move their body. Those reasons are real. They are also, as death row conclusively

demonstrates, not the point. The point is what you do with the space and the body you actually have.

The Target Principle

Before any specific practice is described, there is a principle that underlies everything we know about sustainable physical movement: a body will train harder for a target than for an idea.

For years, the physical practice on death row was organized around basketball. Twice a week, for a brief window of outdoor time, there was a court and other men who played. Those hours were short, competitive and precious. Every other day, in the cell, the training was aimed at being ready when that door opened. The push-ups were not for general fitness. The squats were not for appearance. The entire practice had a specific destination and that destination kept it alive through years of monotony, injury and institutional disruption.

This matters because most people approach movement as an idea...they want to be healthier, stronger, more energetic...rather than as a practice aimed at something particular. Ideas are fragile. They dissolve when life gets busy, when the weather is bad, when initial motivation fades. Targets are not fragile. A man training to keep up with his grandchildren will train on days he doesn't feel like it. A woman building toward a specific hike will not easily skip a session. A target transforms exercise from something you do when conditions are favorable into something you do because you have made a commitment to a specific future self.

If you do not have a target, find one before you attempt to build a movement practice. It does not need to be athletic. It

needs to be real: something you want your body to be able to do that it cannot quite do right now.

Invention as Necessity

The physical practice that developed over years in the cell was not downloaded from a fitness app. There was no app. It was assembled from available materials: a body, a small amount of floor space and a willingness to improvise.

The core routine was a high-intensity circuit: push-ups directly into squats, squats directly into improvised curls with whatever was dense enough to create resistance...commissary goods, books, bags filled with available materials. Then burpees. Repeated five to seven times through, as fast as correct form allowed. Completed in under an hour. Repeated the following day.

By current fitness science standards, this is excellent programming. The structure maps closely onto what exercise research now recommends for cardiovascular and muscular development in limited time and space. But it was not designed by a researcher. It was designed by someone who needed to stay capable and had almost nothing to work with. Over two decades of refinement, it produced results: a body that remained competitive on a basketball court into the mid-fifties, maintained a healthy weight across years of institutional food and recovered from a significant knee injury to return to full function.

For close to a decade, a mattress rolled tight and cinched into a mesh bag served as a heavy bag. Three-minute rounds, two days a week, for ten years. Not to prepare for fighting...for keeping reflexes sharp and hands quick in a place where any form of skill maintenance mattered to a man's sense of himself

as capable. Ten years of this practice, with improvised equipment, produced the same results that expensive equipment would have.

Look around the space you occupy right now. What is in it that could become a tool? The floor is a surface for yoga, push-ups, stretching. The wall supports a handstand or a push-up variation. Stairs are cardiovascular equipment. The body itself, in the right configurations, provides most of the resistance most people need. The absence of a gym is not the absence of options. It is an invitation to be more creative than you would have to be otherwise.

The Work Nobody Sees

There is a dimension of physical practice that the visible workout does not capture and it may be the most instructive of all.

For years on death row, without a ball, dribbling drills continued. Without a bag, boxing combinations were thrown at air. The physical vocabulary of a game...the footwork, the catch and release of a jump shot, the shoulder movements that create space...was rehearsed daily in a space too small to actually play. When the door finally opened and the court was available, the reps were already in the body. There was no need to warm up skills that had gone cold, because those skills had been maintained through daily invisible practice.

The principle this illustrates is one that serious practitioners in virtually every field understand and most people overlook: *the visible performance is the product of invisible repetition*. The shot that looks effortless was made effortless by thousands of repetitions done in private, with no audience, no applause, no immediate reward. The response to

a hard situation that looks wise and measured was built during the quiet hours when nobody was watching.

We live in a culture that celebrates performance and often ignores the preparation that makes it possible. Social media has amplified this...we see results and finished products far more than we see the long, unglamorous process of building them. People want the visible result without the invisible work. But the invisible work is not the price of the result. It is the result. The person you become in the hours that nobody sees is the person you are.

This applies directly and practically to the body: move when nobody is watching. Do the practice before you have an audience for it. The person who builds a physical practice in private, without the reinforcement of social approval, is building something more durable than the person who requires external motivation to stay consistent. Build for yourself first. The results will speak eventually.

Discipline Is Not the Opposite of Freedom

People sometimes frame physical practice under severe constraint as an act of defiance...a way of resisting a system designed to diminish the body. There is something to that framing, but it does not, by honest account, sustain a practice across decades.

What sustains it is simpler and more durable: the decision to remain a capable human being and the daily choices that follow naturally from that decision. Not defiance. Not symbolism. Practice. The commitment is not to a statement. It is to a standard...the standard of maintaining the body that carries everything else.

This matters because defiance, as a motivation, tends to exhaust itself. Adversaries change. Systems shift. The emotional charge of resistance diminishes over time. A practice grounded in a simple commitment to capability renews itself every time the body is used. It is self-sustaining in a way that more dramatic motivations are not.

There is also something important in the relationship between physical discipline and genuine freedom...a relationship that the cultural narrative frequently gets backward. The shallow version of freedom is freedom from discipline: the ability to do whatever you feel like, whenever you feel like it. That is the freedom of a leaf in the wind. It offers nothing when circumstances turn hard.

Real freedom...the kind that holds under pressure, that survives grief and fear and setback...comes through discipline: the trained ability to act according to your values rather than your impulses, to choose your response rather than simply being carried by your reaction. That capacity is built through the body as much as anywhere else. Every day you move when you don't feel like moving, you are training something more important than your cardiovascular system. You are training your will. And your will, exercised consistently over time, determines the quality of your response to every hard thing your life will ask of you.

The Practice: The Minimum

We are not prescribing a workout program. There are many good resources for that elsewhere. What we want to give you is a commitment small enough that no reasonable circumstance can prevent it.

Every day, for the next thirty days, give ten minutes to deliberate physical movement. Not incidental walking. Not general activity. Ten minutes you set aside, in whatever space you have, for the specific purpose of using your body.

Push-ups and squats. Yoga. Stretching. Dancing in your kitchen. What it cannot be is zero and it cannot depend on equipment you don't own or conditions that don't currently exist.

Ten minutes. Every day. For thirty days. Then evaluate.

Two decades of daily movement in a six-by-nine cell prove the space is sufficient. The question is never the space. The question is always the decision.

Chapter 3: Food, Deprivation and Choice

What the Tray Teaches

The food served on death row is not designed to nourish. This is not a cynical characterization...it is the straightforward outcome of an institutional food system whose priorities are cost, scalability and the meeting of minimum caloric requirements. Whether the food serves the human body at a deeper level than caloric adequacy is simply not a question the system is structured to ask.

The result is predictable. Main entrees arrive smelling of industrial preparation and tasting of something the body recognizes as wrong before the mind has processed why. Protein sources appear several times a week that are dense and food-adjacent but not, by the account of men who have eaten them for decades, something that leaves the body feeling fed. The state meets its obligation in the narrowest technical sense: calories are provided. Nourishment is another matter.

What a man does in response to this is, in the domain of the cell, one of the few decisions remaining. And that decision, made daily for years, turns out to be a profound teacher.

The first lesson is about refusal. Not pickiness...refusal. The decision not to eat something that will harm you, even when it is what has been placed in front of you and no obviously better alternative exists, is a basic act of self-respect. It is a declaration that the body is worth protecting even inside a system that does not share that assessment.

Most people eating outside prison walls have never framed their dietary choices this way. They have been shaped instead by habit, by convenience, by marketing, by the fact that the harmful option is right there and the better option requires more effort. The structure of the modern food environment is, in its own way, as coercive as the prison tray: it makes the worst options the easiest and the best options the ones requiring the most deliberate decision-making. Understanding that structure...seeing the engineering...is the first step toward making decisions within it rather than simply being shaped by it.

Food as Information

Here is a frame that changes everything once it is genuinely internalized: food is not fuel. The reduction of eating to a fuel-and-engine metaphor strips out almost everything important about nourishment and replaces it with a model that makes a fast-food meal and a carefully prepared whole-food meal seem equivalent as long as the calorie counts match.

Food is information. Every bite communicates something to the body's systems...about the environment, about the season, about the kind of work being asked of the organism. Whole food carries coherent information: the signals that the body has evolved over millennia to receive and interpret. Processed food carries different information...about industrial chemistry, about flavor engineering, about a supply chain that has no relationship to your biology. Your cells receive both kinds of information and respond accordingly.

When the information is coherent, the body does what it is supposed to do. When the information is incoherent...when the body receives molecules it does not recognize, sweetness

without nutrients, calories without minerals...it does the best it can, which is often not good enough. Confusion, experienced at the cellular level over months and years, accumulates into the conditions that most people experience as chronic fatigue, poor mood and general unwellness.

This reframe is not about eliminating food groups or adopting a particular dietary philosophy. It is about a shift in attention...toward what your food is actually communicating to your body and whether that communication serves the life you are trying to live.

Authorship in the Cell

With institutional food largely rejected as inadequate, the practical question becomes what else is available. In the cell, the answer is commissary...whatever can be purchased through the institutional store. The commissary runs unpredictably. A substantial order in a week of poor stock might yield refried beans, ramen noodles, peanuts, tortillas, coffee, chips. What comes back is not predictable. What is done with what comes back is where creativity...and choice...enter.

A meal prepared without a stove or microwave begins with hot water from the tap. Dry ingredients are combined in a sealed bag: the beans, broken noodles, seasoning, whatever else is on hand. The bag goes into a sink of the hottest available water. Hours pass. What emerges is cooked...not elegantly, but practically. It is warm, combined and more nourishing than the separate ingredients eaten cold would be.

This is not romantic. It is not culinary. It is a man, with severely limited resources, refusing to surrender his nutrition entirely to a system that does not care about it. Every time that

bag goes into the water, a decision is being made: *I am going to participate in what goes into my body. Even here. Even with this.*

We use the word *authorship* deliberately. Most people in the developed world are not the authors of what they eat. A corporation decided the recipe. A marketing department decided the packaging. A drive-through menu engineered to optimize profit rather than health decided what options appear. The eater shows up, pays, receives whatever the system produced and the body processes the consequences of a decision made by someone who has never met them.

The practice of cooking for yourself...even simply, even imperfectly...is the reclamation of authorship. It is the insertion of intention into a process that, for most people, has none. You do not need culinary skill. You need the decision to participate in what goes into your body, with some regularity and some attention.

The Psychology of Feeding Yourself

There is a question beneath the nutritional one that this chapter most wants to name, because it applies to a surprising number of people and rarely gets addressed directly.

Some people reading this have a hard time feeding themselves well because, at some level they have not fully articulated, they do not feel they are worth the effort.

They will cook for their children. They will prepare a meal for a partner, a friend, a guest, without a second thought. They will spend an hour making something for someone else and feel genuinely glad to have done it. But when it is just them...when nobody is watching and nobody else will eat it...suddenly it is cereal at the counter, or a drive-through on the way home, or nothing at all.

That pattern is not about nutrition, or time, or money, or culinary skill. It is a quiet sermon, preached daily, about one's own worth. And the body, which keeps careful and cumulative score, is listening.

Feeding yourself with care is an act of self-respect before it is anything else. Not the performative care that produces elaborate meals for documentation. The simple, undramatic care that says: this body matters and what enters it matters and the act of preparing a meal for myself with some degree of attention is a statement about how I regard the person I am living in.

If that statement is difficult to make...if the idea of preparing a real meal just for yourself feels indulgent or unnecessary...sit with that resistance before dismissing it. It is telling you something worth hearing. Not about food. About the relationship you have with yourself.

Sharing What You Have

We want to close this chapter with a practice that might seem counterintuitive in a chapter focused on individual nourishment: the practice of sharing food.

In an environment where every man is living with some degree of deprivation, some live with far more than others. Men without family support, without anyone putting money on their books, are dependent entirely on the institutional tray. They eat what the state provides, because there is nothing else.

Sharing commissary with those men...passing something through the bars, leaving something outside a cell, acknowledging another person's hunger and responding to it...is a practice maintained when resources allow. Not as charity. As remembering. A reminder that even the cell's walls

are not the boundary of what a person is or what they can offer the people around them.

This belongs in a chapter on physical wellness because nourishment is not only biological. A body fed in complete isolation, by a person who has no one to share with, is being fed incompletely. The communal dimension of eating...the oldest form of human bonding, the original act of trust...is not a luxury added on top of the nutritional transaction. It is part of what makes a meal a meal.

In whatever form is available to you, eat with people sometimes. Not in the distracted, screen-mediated, halfway-present way that most shared meals now happen. Actually with people...with your attention on the food and on the people around you. And when you have enough, share some of it. The act of sharing feeds both people, in more ways than one.

The Practice: One Authored Meal

This week, prepare one meal for yourself with deliberate attention. The meal does not need to be elaborate. It needs to be made by you, for you, with some care about what goes into it and how it is made.

Cook slowly enough to notice what you are doing. Eat without a screen. Taste what you made. Notice how your body responds in the hour that follows.

Do this once this week.

If you find yourself resistant to the idea...if feeding yourself this much attention feels unnecessary or uncomfortable...notice the resistance without judging it. Then do it anyway. The resistance is information. So is what happens when you move through it.

End of Part I

Part II: The Mind...Surviving Time

The body can be sustained through discipline. The mind is a more complicated project.

A body in poor conditions will give you clear and immediate feedback: it aches, it weakens, it slows. The mind's deterioration under sustained pressure is far less visible and far more insidious. It does not announce itself. It creeps. A man who is losing his psychological grip on a difficult situation often does not know it until the grip has already slipped considerably, because the instrument doing the losing is the same instrument that would be used to notice the loss.

This is why the practices in this section require more deliberate attention than the physical ones. The body will tell you when it needs water. The mind will not always tell you when it needs stillness, or structure, or genuine engagement with something larger than its own circling thoughts. You have to build those things proactively, before the need becomes acute...because by the time the need is acute, the capacity to build them may have already been compromised.

Death row presents the mind with a specific and nearly unprecedented challenge: an almost total absence of the anchors that most people use, often without realizing it, to organize their sense of time, progress and purpose. There is no career trajectory, no weekend to look forward to, no project deadline, no graduation, no vacation, no visible horizon of any kind. There is only the present day and an indeterminate future...a future that may end in release or may end in execution and that offers no clear signals as to which.

Living well inside that condition required the development of practices that most people in the free world have never needed to build deliberately, because their lives provide them automatically. The practices in this section...around time, learning and expression...are what filled the gap where those automatic anchors used to be.

They are practices you can use too. Because even outside the walls, the absence of genuine mental engagement...the drift, the distraction, the days that pass without any particular sense that they contained something worth experiencing...is more common than we like to admit.

Chapter 4: The Weight of Time

Time Without a Horizon

Most people's experience of time is organized around endpoints. The school year ends. The project is completed. The vacation arrives. The weekend comes. These endpoints are not just practical markers...they are psychological anchors. They give time a shape. They make it possible to feel that you are moving through something rather than simply existing in it.

Remove those endpoints and time becomes something different. Not slower, exactly and not faster...though people who have experienced this describe it both ways at different moments. It becomes *flat*. Undifferentiated. Each day structurally identical to the one before it and the one that will follow, with no event on the horizon that could meaningfully be called an arrival.

This is the experience of time on death row and it represents one of the most significant psychological challenges the environment poses. It is not dramatic in the way that physical danger is dramatic. It is slow, cumulative and almost invisible to anyone who has not lived through it. But over years and decades, the flatness of time without horizon does measurable damage to the mind...to motivation, to the sense of agency, to the basic human experience of feeling that your life is going somewhere.

The man whose experiences ground this book has spent more than twenty years in that environment. He describes the experience of incarcerated time as categorically different from any other experience of time...different from doing time with

a release date and unimaginably different from life in the free world. With a release date, even a distant one, time moves toward something. Without one, it simply moves. The movement itself becomes the only thing.

What he built in response to this condition is the foundation of this chapter. It is not a set of techniques for managing boredom. It is a complete reorientation of the relationship between time and meaning...an interior architecture that makes purposeful living possible even in the total absence of external forward motion.

Creating Meaning Versus Finding It

Most people approach meaning the way they approach resources: as something that exists somewhere and must be located. The meaningful life is out there. The right career, the right relationship, the right circumstances will bring it within reach. Until then, life is a waiting room.

This approach to meaning...passive, acquisitive, dependent on circumstances...is fragile under the best conditions and collapses entirely under pressure. When the circumstances that were supposed to deliver meaning fail to materialize, or are taken away, a person built on this model has nothing to fall back on. The waiting room has no exit.

On death row, there is no future circumstance waiting to deliver meaning. That lesson arrives early and without softening. And the men who survive it psychologically...who remain whole and purposeful across decades of confinement...are not the ones who somehow found meaning in their circumstances. They are the ones who understood, often through hard experience, that meaning is not found. It

is made. It is constructed, daily, from whatever materials are available.

The shift this requires is not small. It is a fundamental reorientation of the self's relationship to time and circumstance. Instead of asking *when will things get better so I can begin living meaningfully*, it asks *what can I make of this day, with what I have, right now*. Instead of waiting for the circumstances to become worthy of full engagement, it engages fully with the circumstances that actually exist.

The man at the center of this book spent extended periods...sometimes spanning years...absorbed in projects that had no obvious external value. Learning to sew. Making gym shorts from oversized institutional shirts, cutting them down, adding pockets and drawstrings through careful stitch work. Learning to draw by watching a neighbor through the bars and mimicking his strokes. Building small sculptures from cardboard. Working on electronics. Teaching himself, from scratch, a new skill simply because there was time and a mind willing to use it.

These projects were not productive in any conventional sense. They did not advance a career. They did not produce a portfolio. They were not going to be photographed or monetized or used to impress anyone. They were, as he describes them, simply *occupation of the mind*...the daily practice of being a person who is engaged rather than a person who is waiting.

And yet, looked back on across decades, those projects did something far more important than anything productive might have. They maintained his identity as someone capable of learning, creating and following through. They kept the

mind's machinery in motion at times when external circumstances offered no motion at all. They were, in the deepest sense, acts of self-preservation.

The lesson for people living outside these walls is direct and uncomfortable: if you are waiting for circumstances to become good enough before you begin fully engaging with your life, you are already losing the only time you have. The circumstances will always offer some reason to wait. The practice of meaning-making is the refusal to wait...the decision to engage with what is actually in front of you, as fully as you can, right now.

Living With Radical Uncertainty

There is a particular quality of psychological pressure on death row that has no real equivalent outside it: the knowledge that the state intends to kill you, held alongside the daily reality of an ordinary institutional life in which that intended killing may or may not happen and is never quite present or absent. It is not the pressure of imminent danger, which at least provides clarity. It is the pressure of a permanently unresolved threat...a shadow that never fully arrives and never entirely lifts.

Most people, when they learn about this aspect of death row, assume it must be the dominant feature of the psychological landscape. The thing that fills every quiet moment, that colors every waking hour, that makes ordinary functioning impossible. They ask, understandably, how anyone lives with it.

The answer, by direct account, is both simpler and more counterintuitive than expected: *by not giving it the attention it demands.*

This is not denial. It is not a performance of toughness. It is a deliberate and practiced choice about where the mind's limited resources go. The threat is real. The uncertainty is real. Neither of those facts changes by being rehearsed. Spending time thinking about what the state intends to do has no effect on what the state will do...but it has a significant effect on the quality of the mind doing the thinking. Attention given to uncontrollable outcomes is attention taken from whatever remains controllable.

The decision, made early and maintained across decades, was to direct attention entirely toward what could be influenced: the legal fight, the relationships being maintained, the learning being pursued, the body being kept capable, the mind being kept sharp. Not because the threat was small, but because the threat was real...and a real threat deserves to be met with the clearest, most capable mind available. Feeding the threat with daily rehearsal would have produced the opposite.

This principle has a name in psychological literature: *the locus of control*. Research consistently shows that people who focus their energy on what they can influence, rather than what they cannot, experience better mental health outcomes across a wide range of difficult circumstances. Death row provides perhaps the most extreme test case for this principle. It holds.

For most people reading this, the uncontrollable threats are considerably smaller than death by execution. But the mechanism of rumination...the rehearsal of fears and worst-case scenarios that cannot be resolved by thinking about them...is identical and its cost is the same. Every hour the mind spends on what it cannot change is an hour it is not spending

on what it can. That exchange is never worth it, no matter how compelling the anxiety feels.

The Prison of No Routine, the Freedom of One

Paradoxically, one of the most stabilizing features of life on death row is also one of its most obviously oppressive ones: the rigid institutional schedule. Meals come at fixed times. Count happens at fixed intervals. The rhythms of the day, however punishing in their design, are predictable. A man always knows what is coming next. That predictability...even in its brutal form...provides a kind of scaffolding that the mind can use.

Remove that scaffolding and most people discover they did not know how dependent they were on it. The person who retires after a career of structured days and finds themselves unable to organize the sudden freedom is experiencing exactly this. The person who loses their job and cannot get traction on what to do with themselves. The person who moves to a new city and, freed from the social structure of their old life, finds themselves adrift. Structure, even imposed structure, provides more psychological support than most people realize until it is gone.

The practice that emerges from this understanding is one of the most practically valuable in this entire book: *build your own structure before your circumstances impose one on you*. Do not wait for external demands to organize your days. Construct a rhythm...for waking, for movement, for learning, for reflection, for connection...and hold to it with enough consistency that it becomes the scaffolding your mind can rely on.

This is not a prescription for rigidity. Structure and spontaneity are not opposites. A life built on a reliable daily

architecture has more room for genuine spontaneity than one that is simply reactive...because when the basic functions of the day are anchored, the mind is free to engage creatively with what arises rather than perpetually scrambling to organize itself.

On death row, life has no shortage of imposed structure. What has to be built, deliberately, is the interior structure that exists within and alongside it...the personal rhythms of learning, reflection and engagement that make the day more than the sum of institutional requirements. Outside the walls, the challenge is often the reverse: so much apparent freedom that the days dissolve into distraction and the weeks begin to feel identical in their shapelessness.

In both cases, the solution is the same. Build the structure. Then live inside it.

Small Things Are Big Things

One of the most consistent and striking features of the perspective that emerges from extended time on death row is an acute appreciation for small pleasures...small moments of beauty, connection, or simple sensory pleasure that most people pass through without registering.

A conversation that goes nowhere in particular but goes there comfortably. The quality of light at a specific time of day. A meal that tastes better than expected. A piece of music that lands in exactly the right moment. The ability to sit outside for a few hours. These things, which most people in the free world treat as ambient background...pleasant when noticed, invisible most of the time...become, in conditions of sustained deprivation, genuinely significant events.

This is not the romanticization of suffering. It is the recalibration of attention. Most people in comfortable circumstances have their baseline of experience set so high that only extraordinary pleasures register as pleasures at all. Everything ordinary...a comfortable bed, a meal they chose themselves, the ability to walk outside whenever they want...has become simply the floor of experience rather than something to be noticed and appreciated. When the floor of experience drops dramatically, as it does on death row, ordinary pleasures reassert themselves with their original force.

What death row teaches, at its most practical, is that the floor of ordinary human experience contains more genuine richness than most people in comfortable circumstances ever access...not because they lack the richness, but because they lack the attention.

You do not need to have your circumstances reduced to cultivate this attention. You need only to practice it...to deliberately bring your awareness, on a regular basis, to what is ordinary and available and easy to overlook. The cup of coffee in a quiet house. The conversation with someone you love that has no particular point. The feeling of sun on your face for thirty seconds between errands. Small things are big things, if you are paying close enough attention to know they are happening.

This is, at its root, what contemplative traditions across all cultures have been teaching for thousands of years. What is unusual here is the source of the instruction: not a monastery or a meditation retreat, but a man who learned it in a cell because the cell did not give him the option of staying inattentive.

The Practice: Three Minutes

Once a day, for the next week, take three minutes in which you do nothing except be where you are.

No phone. No music. No podcast. No task. Three minutes of simply occupying the present moment with some degree of intention.

This is harder than it sounds if you have not practiced it. The mind will immediately generate things it would rather be doing. Let it generate them. Notice the generation. Return to where you are.

If three minutes feels too long, start with ninety seconds. The duration is less important than the quality of presence.

Notice, over the course of a week, whether those three minutes begin to change the quality of the minutes around them.

Chapter 5: Reading as Freedom

Learning When No One Requires It

There is a distinction that reveals something important about the relationship between learning and motivation: the distinction between learning that is required and learning that is chosen.

In most people's formal education, learning is required. Assignments are given, deadlines are set, grades are dispensed. The learning happens...to varying degrees of depth...because external structures demand it. Remove those structures, as life after formal education largely does for most people and the learning often stops. Not entirely, but substantially. The deliberate, sustained engagement with new knowledge or new skills that characterized years of schooling gives way to the passive absorption of entertainment and the mind that was once actively being expanded begins to operate within whatever boundaries it already has.

On death row, formal requirements do not apply. There are no assignments, no deadlines, no grades. There is no institution demanding that the incarcerated mind continue to develop. The learning that happens...and in some cases, a great deal of learning happens...does so entirely by choice, motivated by something other than external expectation.

In Paul's case, the primary motivation for reading was intensely practical: learning what he needed to know to fight for his life. Legal texts. Court documents. The procedural architecture of appeals. Everything absorbed in service of

understanding the system that held him and finding within it the arguments that might eventually release him.

This is not the kind of learning that gets celebrated in inspirational stories about self-improvement behind bars. It is something arguably more instructive: learning driven not by a love of knowledge in the abstract, but by the immediate necessity of understanding a specific and consequential situation. The love of learning for its own sake is a beautiful thing, but it is also a luxury available mainly to people whose basic situation does not require their full intellectual engagement. Plenty of meaningful learning happens under pressure, driven by need, in service of outcomes that matter deeply to the learner.

The lesson for people outside these walls is not that you should suffer before you can truly learn...it is that the motivation matters less than the commitment. Whether you are learning because you love it, because you need it, or simply because you have decided that a mind in motion serves you better than one standing still, the outcome...a broader, more capable mind...is the same. Find what you need to learn and pursue it with the seriousness it deserves.

The Skills You Discover in the Absence of Choice

Death row taught a man what he was good at, in a way that the free world might never have managed.

This is a strange benefit to name. But it is real and worth examining carefully. Most people's lives are constrained, in ways they rarely examine, by what is expected of them, what their social environment values and what the economy rewards. People pursue careers that their families approved of,

develop skills that the job market demanded and spend decades doing work that is useful without ever asking whether it is the work that corresponds to some deeper aptitude or affinity.

On death row, those constraints simply do not apply. There is no job market. There is no career. There are no family expectations about professional direction. There is only time and whatever internal inclinations a man discovers when nothing external is directing him toward anything in particular.

What was discovered, across years of trial and experimentation, was a genuine aptitude for construction...for building things, engineering small structures, creating physical objects from raw materials. Not painting, particularly, though painting was learned and practiced because it was useful for generating a small income within the facility. But the work that came alive...that produced the deep absorption characteristic of genuine aptitude...was making things. Small sculptures from cardboard. Boxes and cases assembled with care and ingenuity from institutional scraps. The transformation of available materials into structured, functional objects.

When asked why this particular activity engaged him so much more than others, the answer was immediate: engineers and architects. The men in his family, across generations, had been people who built things. The aptitude was inherited, running in the bloodline, but had never found its expression before...not because the capacity wasn't there, but because the circumstances of his life before incarceration had not pointed him toward it.

This is worth sitting with, because it raises a question that most people never think to ask: what are you good at that

your life has not yet pointed you toward? What aptitudes are running in you that the circumstances of your career, your family history, your economic situation and your social world have never provided occasion to discover?

Most people will never know the answer, because they never find themselves in conditions that remove the usual directing forces and leave them to discover their own inclinations by default. The invitation this offers, from an unusual source, is to experiment deliberately...to try things outside the groove of what is expected or habitual, not in service of any particular outcome, but in the spirit of finding out what responds.

The Mind in Motion: Art, Making and the Meditative State

There is a particular quality of mental state that emerges during the sustained practice of a skilled, absorptive activity...a state in which the usual background noise of worry, planning and self-commentary falls away and the mind is simply present in what it is doing. Psychologists call this state *flow*. Contemplative traditions have recognized and cultivated it for millennia under different names. It is one of the most reliably restorative and genuinely pleasurable states available to human beings and most people experience it far less often than they could.

Any skilled activity, practiced with genuine attention, can produce this state. It is not exclusive to art, though art is a common gateway. The man at the center of this book discovered it first through the physical practice of drawing...watching a neighbor through the bars, mimicking stroke by stroke, repeating each motion until it became natural,

then building on what was natural toward what was more refined. Later, the same state arrived through the construction of three-dimensional objects from available materials. The specific medium mattered less than the quality of engagement: full attention, developing skill, a task that was never quite finished because there was always more to learn.

What this state produces, beyond the pleasure of the activity itself, is a mind that has been given time to reset. The anxieties and preoccupations that fill most conscious hours...the legal situation, the relationships, the institution's daily irritations...do not disappear when you enter flow. But they are set aside, temporarily and completely, in a way that genuine rest makes possible and distraction does not. There is a crucial difference between a mind that is absorbed in creation and a mind that is numbed by entertainment. Entertainment occupies the mind's surface. Genuine creative engagement occupies its depth. The recovery that follows is correspondingly different.

The practical implication of this for people outside the walls is straightforward and frequently overlooked: making things...in any medium, at any level of skill, for no audience and no purpose beyond the making itself...is not a luxury or a hobby. It is a form of mental hygiene as necessary as sleep and one that most people in the modern world have essentially abandoned in favor of consuming what other people have made.

You do not need to be an artist. You need only to find an activity that requires your full attention, develops your skill over time and produces something...however modest...that did

not exist before you made it. The activity itself matters less than the quality of presence it demands.

Staying Connected to the World

One of the quieter psychological dangers of long-term incarceration is the slow disconnection from the world outside the walls...the gradual sense that the world is moving on without you, that the gap between the life you knew and the life being lived out there is growing too wide to bridge, that you are becoming a person from another era, stranded in an institutional present while everything else continues to change.

The response to this danger is deliberate and consistent: not letting the world go on without you. Staying informed. Staying engaged. Treating the connection to the larger world as a responsibility rather than a privilege.

Podcasts became the primary vehicle for this...for news, for politics, for sports, for the ongoing conversation of public life. Not passively, but actively: listening with the specific intention of remaining a person who knows what is happening, who has opinions about it, who can participate in conversations about it when conversation is possible. The outside world, in all its complexity and noise, is kept deliberately present. The walls cannot be allowed to become the boundary of what is known or cared about.

Music served a different and deeper function. With the right playlist and enough quiet, it became possible to inhabit, mentally and emotionally, places left behind years ago. The streets of home, which have certainly changed and are no longer quite as remembered...these can be traveled, in a blindfold, with a particular song playing. The capacity to go somewhere real, somewhere personal, somewhere that predates

the institution, is not a small thing. It is a form of continuity...a thread connecting the self that existed before incarceration to the self that exists inside it.

Both of these practices...staying informed and staying emotionally connected through music...point to the same underlying principle: the deliberate maintenance of a self that is larger than its current circumstances. A person is not only what their environment makes them. They are also what they remember, what they know, what they care about, what they can hear in a song on a quiet afternoon. Keeping those dimensions of selfhood alive requires intention, especially in environments that are working to reduce the self to its most minimal institutional form.

For people outside the walls, the equivalent practice is less obvious because the erosion is less obvious. But it happens. People become absorbed by the immediate...the demands of work, the habits of entertainment, the rhythms of a life on autopilot...and gradually lose contact with the larger self: the self that has opinions and curiosities and aesthetic responses and connections to places and times that are not present in the immediate moment. Staying connected to that larger self is not automatic. It requires the same kind of deliberate attention, even in circumstances that do not seem to demand it.

The Practice: Learn Something Deliberately

This week, spend thirty minutes learning something you have chosen because it interests you...not because it is useful, not because someone else suggested it, not because it is relevant to your work or any external demand.

A skill, a subject, a language, a craft, a period of history, a scientific concept. Anything that engages genuine curiosity.

Find the source of learning that best suits what you want to understand...a book, a documentary, a tutorial, a class. Begin.

Do this for thirty minutes once this week. Notice whether thirty minutes feels like enough.

Notice also whether the experience of choosing what to learn...of following curiosity rather than obligation...produces a different quality of engagement than learning you have been assigned.

Chapter 6: Writing to Stay Alive

The Letter as a Lifeline

Communication with the outside world, from inside a cell, takes forms that most people in the free world have largely abandoned: the letter, the carefully composed written message, the correspondence that requires something more of both writer and reader than a text or a social media post.

On death row, letters are not a nostalgic preference. They are often the primary vehicle for maintaining relationships that matter...the medium through which a man proves to the people he loves that he is still present, still thinking about them, still worth the effort of a response. The telephone helps. Visits, when they happen, are irreplaceable. But the letter occupies a particular and irreplaceable space, because it requires something the other channels do not: sustained thought, directed deliberately at one person, put into words that will outlast the moment of their writing.

The man at the center of this book has written letters throughout his time on death row that are, by account of the people who received them, genuinely significant. Not because they were literary...he would be the first to resist that characterization. But because they were honest. And because they were aimed: written with a specific person in mind, in full knowledge of who that person was and what they were navigating, with something useful to say to that person in that moment.

Several of those relationships involved people who were young when he arrived on death row...family members whose

formative years coincided with his first years of incarceration. For those people, his letters arrived during childhood and adolescence and the difficult middle years of early adulthood, carrying perspectives and challenges that nobody else in their lives was quite offering. He could be candid with them in ways that the adults around them often could not...not because distance made honesty easier, but because he had made a commitment to candor as the foundation of what he had to offer. He could not be physically present. He could be genuinely honest.

Those relationships, maintained through letters across decades, are among the most significant of his life and their significance is mutual. Several of the people who received those letters have, as adults, acknowledged directly that the correspondence helped shape them during years when shaping mattered enormously. From a cell, with no ability to show up in person, with no material resources to offer, a man managed to have a formative impact on people he loved.

The instrument was words on paper. The underlying force was genuine care, expressed with consistency and honesty across many years. Neither of those things required any resource beyond the will to use them.

Having an Impact as Identity

There is a dimension of the letter-writing practice that goes beyond communication. It is about identity...about who you are in the world, regardless of where you are physically located.

On death row, the institutional machinery works, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, to reduce a man to his sentence. To the classification on his file, the number on his cell, the legal status that determines every movement and every right. The

system's logic is totalizing: you are here and here is what you are. Everything else...your history, your relationships, your aptitudes, your contributions...is incidental to the primary fact of your confinement.

The refusal of that reduction is not primarily dramatic or confrontational. It is quiet and daily. It happens in the act of sitting down to write a letter to someone whose life you are genuinely engaged with. It happens in the experience of receiving a reply that shows, unmistakably, that what you wrote mattered. It happens in the accumulated evidence, over years, that you are a person who has a meaningful effect on other people...that your presence in the world, mediated through whatever channels remain available, does something real.

Having an impact gives you an identity that no institutional classification can take away, because it is established not by the system that holds you but by the people whose lives you have touched. This is not a sentiment. It is a practical psychological anchor...one of the most durable available, because it is grounded in something external to the self and resistant to the distortions of mood or circumstance.

Most people in the free world have this anchor available and do not fully use it. They know, abstractly, that they matter to people. They less often take the specific, intentional action of putting that mattering into words...of writing the letter, making the call, sending the message that says: *I am thinking about you. I see what you are navigating. Here is what I want to say to you about it.* These acts of expressed care are the substance of the impact. They require nothing but the will to offer them.

The Unwritten Journal

Among the most honest moments in the conversations that produced this book was an admission about journaling: a journal was made, with genuine intention to use it and then was not used. Not because the time wasn't available. Not because the materials weren't there. Because something about the practice of directed self-reflection...of sitting down to write honestly about what was happening inside...never quite became a habit, even with full knowledge of its value.

We include this not to celebrate the omission, but because it is instructive in a way that the success stories are not. Knowing that a practice would help you is not the same as doing it. Intending to do something that is good for you and failing to do it is one of the most universal human experiences and pretending otherwise...filling a wellness book with nothing but accounts of practices perfectly maintained...would be a disservice to the people reading it.

What the admission also reveals is the particular difficulty of self-directed reflection for people who are temperamentally oriented outward...who process through action and engagement rather than through introspection and written self-examination. Not everyone's inner life opens most readily onto a page. Some people find that they know what they think only after they have said it in conversation, or worked through it in physical activity, or expressed it in some medium other than language.

The value of the journaling practice is not in the journal itself. It is in the deliberate turning of attention toward your own interior...the creation of regular space in which you examine, without judgment or performance, where you are and what is happening inside you. For some people, that

examination happens most naturally in writing. For others, it happens in long walks, in conversation, in prayer, in the kind of silence we described in Chapter 4. The medium is less important than the function: the regular, honest accounting of your interior life.

What we can say with confidence is that the absence of this practice costs something, even when...perhaps especially when...the exterior life appears to be functioning well. The mind that never turns its attention on itself has no way to catch the slow drifts in direction that, unexamined, can take a person far from where they intended to go. The regular check-in...however it happens...is the mechanism of course correction. Without it, you are navigating without instruments.

The Long Relationship: Letters Across Years

Among the relationships that have sustained Paul, one category stands out for its durability and depth: a family he has never met in person, on the other side of an ocean, with whom he has maintained correspondence for more than a decade.

This relationship did not begin in dramatic fashion. It began the way most genuine long-term relationships begin: with small, consistent acts of attention sustained over time. Letters written and answered. Questions asked and answered honestly. The gradual accumulation of shared knowledge...of each other's histories, families, struggles and ordinary pleasures...that constitutes genuine intimacy.

Over twelve years, he has come to know this family with a specificity that would surprise most people who learned its circumstances. He knows the ages and personalities and current situations of children who were young when the

correspondence began and are now adults. He knows the histories of both sides of their family. He knows the texture of their ordinary life in a way that most people do not know about their own neighbors.

They came, at one point, across the ocean to meet him in person. That visit...brief, in the constrained conditions that in-person visits allow...landed in the context of a relationship already built into something real. The physical meeting was confirmation rather than introduction.

This relationship demonstrates something about human connection that is easy to underestimate in an era that equates proximity with intimacy: genuine knowledge of another person, built through sustained and honest communication, creates a bond that geography cannot seriously undermine. The letters...the choosing of words, the effort of articulation, the transmission of attention through the medium of language on paper...did the relational work that, in most modern lives, we assume requires physical presence and shared time and spontaneous contact.

Those things are real goods. But they are not the only goods. The letter...given enough time and enough honesty...builds something they cannot always match.

The Practice: Write the Letter

Think of one person in your life whom you have not contacted recently, but who matters to you.

Write them something. Not a text. Not a brief message. A letter...or at least something with the character of a letter: composed with some care, aimed specifically at them, saying something you actually mean.

It does not need to be long. It does not need to be eloquent. It needs to be genuine. Write as if the words will outlast the moment of their sending, because they probably will.

Send it.

Notice what happens. Notice what it costs. Notice what it returns.

If the idea of doing this for one person is manageable, consider doing it for one person every month for a year. Notice, at the end of that year, what those twelve letters built.

End of Part II

Part III: The Heart...Connection in Isolation

There is a design logic to extreme confinement that goes beyond the physical. Yes, the walls are close. Yes, the movement is restricted. Yes, the food is inadequate and the light is wrong and the sound is calibrated to prevent genuine rest. All of that is deliberate and all of it is aimed at the body and the mind. But underneath the physical and psychological pressure is a third and perhaps deeper aim: the severing of genuine human connection.

Isolation is not incidental to severe confinement. It is the point. The logic is reductive: strip away everything that makes a person feel that they are part of something, that they matter to others, that their presence in the world has weight...and you reduce the person. You make them smaller. You make the system's grip on them tighter, because a person without connection has fewer reasons to resist the identity the system would assign them.

This is why connection, in conditions of severe confinement, is not simply a comfort. It is resistance. Every relationship maintained across the walls, every bond built within them, every act of genuine care exchanged between people the system would prefer to keep atomized...all of it is a refusal. A refusal to be fully reduced. A refusal to accept the institution's definition of who you are and what you are worth.

The chapters in this section explore what that refusal looks like in practice: the surprising depth of brotherhood that forms between men in conditions of shared extremity, the ways that

grief is held and processed without the rituals most people rely on and the particular practices of love that sustain connection across the barriers of distance, confinement and time. What emerges from all three is a set of insights about human connection that apply far beyond death row...because the forces working against genuine connection in the free world, while less dramatic, are no less real.

Chapter 7: Brotherhood on the Row

Community Is Not Optional

Human beings are not designed for isolation. This is not a sentiment...it is a finding repeated across virtually every domain of human science, from evolutionary biology to social neuroscience to epidemiology. People who lack strong social connections have significantly higher rates of cardiovascular disease, cognitive decline, depression and early mortality than those who maintain them. The effect size of social isolation on health outcomes is comparable to smoking fifteen cigarettes a day. Loneliness is not a preference. It is a physiological condition with physiological consequences.

Death row is designed with apparent indifference to this fact. The architecture separates people. The scheduling limits interaction. The culture of punishment discourages the formation of bonds that might complicate institutional control. Everything about the environment, in its official design, works against community.

And yet community forms anyway. Because human beings form community the way water finds a level...not through deliberate resistance to the terrain, but through the simple operation of their nature. Put people together in any sustained way, under any conditions and they will begin to build the structures of social life: alliances, hierarchies, economies, norms, rituals, friendships and conflicts. These structures are not imports from the outside world. They are expressions of what human beings are, emerging spontaneously wherever human beings are placed.

Death row is, by this measure, just a different kind of neighborhood. It has the neighbor you trust and the one you don't. It has the equivalent of the person across the street who drives the sensible car and the person down the block who makes questionable decisions. It has its politics, its gossip, its shared experiences that bond people in ways they might not have expected. It has, in short, the full complexity of human social life...compressed into an extreme space, shaped by extreme conditions, but recognizably the same phenomenon.

Understanding this is the first step toward understanding what the brotherhood on the row actually looks like and what it can teach people outside it about the construction of genuine community wherever they are.

What Shows Up Without Being Asked

The clearest demonstration of genuine brotherhood is not what people say to each other. It is what they do, particularly in moments when doing something required no instruction, no request and no expectation of recognition.

When a man returns from a difficult experience...a legal proceeding, a piece of devastating news, a period of separation from the general life of the wing...certain things happen without anyone organizing them. A care package appears. Something from commissary shows up outside the cell. Nobody has been asked. Nobody has announced a collection. The men around him have simply noticed what is happening, made a calculation about what is needed and responded. No names attached, often. No ceremony. Just the practical expression of care, offered through the only material means available.

These gestures are small in the way that a hand extended to someone who is falling is small. They are not small at all. In an environment of scarcity...where every item on commissary has been purchased with money that is not easily replaced, where resources are genuinely limited, where each man is managing his own deprivation...sharing what you have with someone in greater need is an act of real cost. It is not casual generosity. It is the kind of giving that requires you to reckon honestly with what you have and what you can genuinely spare and then to spare it anyway.

For Paul, moments like these have been among the most significant of his years inside. Not because they relieved material hardship, though they did. But because they confirmed something he needed confirmed: that even here, in a place designed to make each man only his own concern, people were choosing otherwise. That the walls had not succeeded in making everyone only their own concern. That the human impulse toward care had survived the Department of Punishment's best efforts to eliminate it.

This confirmation matters psychologically in ways that are hard to overstate. One of the deepest threats of sustained confinement is not physical...it is the slow erosion of the belief that human beings are fundamentally oriented toward each other. When the only institution you deal with is one designed to punish you, when every official interaction is transactional at best and adversarial at worst, it is possible to begin to accept, at some level beneath conscious thought, that this is simply what human beings are: indifferent to each other, interested only in their own advantage, reliable only when coerced. That belief,

once absorbed, is corrosive in ways that outlast the specific conditions that produced it.

The care package that appears without being requested is a small but durable argument against that belief. It says: no, that is not what human beings are. Even here. Even under these conditions. People choose each other. That argument, offered repeatedly over years, keeps the larger worldview intact.

The Depth of Conversations in Extremity

Not all the conversations on death row are profound. To suggest otherwise would be to romanticize in exactly the way that distorts rather than illuminates. Men talk about sports, about politics, about the daily absurdities of institutional life, about what someone said that made no sense, about the food, about nothing in particular. The ordinary texture of social life...the gossip, the humor, the shared irritation at the small indignities...is present exactly as it would be in any sustained community.

But alongside the ordinary, there are conversations of a depth and honesty that the ordinary social world rarely produces. Conversations about relationships...with partners, family members, children...carried on with a candor that men in more comfortable circumstances might not risk, because the stakes of social performance are lower here than anywhere. There are no careers to protect in a death row conversation, no social positions to maintain, no fear that vulnerability will be used against you in the morning meeting. The usual defenses that keep men in particular from genuine honesty with each other are significantly weakened by the circumstances they share.

The result is something that people in the free world often spend decades trying to build and frequently fail to reach: genuine peer intimacy between men. The kind in which one man tells another something true about his fear, his grief, his confusion about a relationship, his uncertainty about himself...and the other man receives it without deflecting, without minimizing, without immediately offering a solution that would change the subject from feeling to problem-solving. The kind in which being known is not a threat but a relief.

Death row does not produce this automatically. Nothing about extremity automatically produces depth. Extremity can as easily produce defensiveness, aggression and withdrawal. What produces depth is the combination of extremity with the willingness to meet it honestly...and that willingness is a choice, available to some and not to others in any population. But the conditions of death row remove some of the usual obstacles to that choice and the result, for men who make it, is a quality of connection that would have been harder to build in the more defended environment of ordinary social life.

The Same Neighborhood, Different Walls

When asked whether the friendships built on death row are qualitatively different from the friendships built in the free world, the answer is both yes and no...and the nuance matters.

The yes: there is a layer of commonality between men on death row that has no equivalent outside it. They share, at the foundation of their lives, an experience that virtually no one else in the world shares. They know what it is to wake up in this particular kind of uncertainty, to navigate this particular kind of institutional life, to maintain their humanity in this particular kind of environment. That shared foundation creates

a baseline of mutual understanding that can take years to build in the free world through the gradual accumulation of shared experience.

The no: the depth of friendship possible in any context is less a function of what the friends have in common than of who each of them is and what they are willing to offer. The brotherhoods built in the free world during formative years...the friends who knew you before you knew yourself, who have seen you at your worst and remained...carry a different but equally real kind of intimacy. Different because it is built on different shared history. Equally real because genuine knowing is equally valuable wherever it develops.

What death row teaches is that genuine community does not require ideal conditions. It requires only the human impulse toward connection and the willingness to act on that impulse in whatever circumstances exist. The walls are closer. The shared neighborhood is smaller. The stakes of every interaction are higher. None of that prevents community. It only changes its texture.

For people in the free world, this is both a comfort and a challenge. The comfort is that community does not require ideal circumstances...it does not require the right city, the right social environment, the right stage of life. The challenge is that community does require active effort: the willingness to be known, to know others, to invest time and honesty and care in the relationships that matter. Those things are available in any neighborhood. The question is whether you are willing to use them.

Giving Space as an Act of Care

One of the most instructive practices of the brotherhood on death row involves not connection but its deliberate temporary suspension...the gift of space.

When someone in the community is facing something hard...a devastating legal development, a piece of news from outside, a loss...the community does not immediately surround him with support. It waits to be told what is needed. Sometimes what is needed is presence: the comfort of other people nearby, available, willing to talk. Sometimes what is needed is distance: the chance to be alone with what is happening, to meet it in private, to find one's own footing before anyone else's perspective enters.

In Paul's case, the approach to profound personal loss was deliberate and explicit: he told the people around him in advance that he needed them to leave him alone for a time. That he had nothing for anyone in the immediate aftermath. That he would return when he was ready and that their job in the meantime was simply to give him the room to be in what he was in.

They did. Without protest, without the intrusive well-meaning that sometimes passes for support, without the need to make his grief into a social event. They gave him what he asked for and waited.

This practice...the reading of what is actually needed rather than the offering of what feels useful to the giver...is one of the most demanding and least discussed forms of care. Most people, when someone they care about is in pain, default to action: they call, they visit, they bring food, they offer advice, they say the things that are supposed to help. This is genuine impulse toward care and it is not without value. But it is also,

frequently, care organized around the giver's need to do something rather than the recipient's actual need in the moment.

The practice of asking...not assuming...what someone needs and then providing exactly that and nothing more, is a form of respect that honors the other person's authority over their own experience. It is also, in communities where this norm is established, a form of trust: a signal that the community will not need you to perform your grief in a particular way, that you can experience what you are experiencing without managing anyone else's feelings about it.

The Practice: Ask Before You Offer

The next time someone you care about is going through something difficult, resist the impulse to immediately offer what you think they need.

Instead, ask a single question: *What would actually help right now?*

Then listen to the answer without editing it toward what you would prefer to give. If they want presence, be present. If they want space, give space. If they want distraction, provide it without making them feel they should want something else.

Notice how different it feels to give what is asked for rather than what feels helpful to give. Notice also what the asking communicates...before anything is offered...about how you regard the person who is going through something hard.

Do this once. Then consider whether it changes the way you understand what care actually looks like.

Chapter 8: Grief Without Space

The Architecture of Mourning

Every human culture, across the full span of recorded history, has developed rituals for grief. The funeral. The burial. The gathering of people who share the loss. The structured time of mourning, with its specific behaviors and its clear beginning and end. These rituals are not arbitrary...they exist because grief, in its raw form, is too large and too formless to be held by an individual alone. The rituals give it shape. They provide a container within which the enormity of loss can be held collectively, honored publicly and...over time...metabolized.

On death row, these rituals are largely unavailable. When someone dies...a family member, a friend, a person whose life intersected with yours in ways that mattered...you are not there. You do not attend the funeral. You do not stand at the graveside. You do not sit in the room with the other people who are grieving and be held by the simple animal comfort of shared physical presence in shared loss. You are in your cell, alone, knowing what is happening somewhere else and unable to be part of it.

This is one of the less discussed but deeply significant forms of deprivation that extended incarceration produces. The grief is real. The loss is real. The need for the rituals that help human beings survive great losses is real. And the rituals are simply not available.

What fills that absence is the subject of this chapter. Not because what fills it is an adequate substitute...it is not...but because the practices that develop in the absence of

conventional mourning offer something that people who have full access to grief rituals often miss: an understanding of what the rituals are actually for and therefore what their essential function can be preserved even when their conventional form cannot.

Knowing It Is Coming

The most demanding form of anticipatory grief is the kind that arrives with a specific timeline and then runs out. The person you love is dying. You know when. You know where. You cannot be there.

In May of 2021, this was Paul's situation. His mother...the center of the family, the person around whom the family's life organized itself...was dying and the decision had been made to remove the machines keeping her alive. He knew the date. He knew the approximate time. He knew that every one of his sisters was gathered around her and that he was not.

What he also knew, because he had spent two decades developing the interior practices that this book describes, was that he needed to go into that day with some degree of preparation. Not to control his grief...grief cannot be controlled and should not be. To be present with it, as fully as possible, from where he was. To find a way to be as there as he could be without being there.

In the weeks before, the family had talked about how they wanted to honor their mother...what gestures, what symbols, what ways of marking her passage felt right. Hummingbirds came up. She had loved them. From inside the cell, the available contribution was this: a paper-mâché hummingbird, made carefully by hand, painted with real attention, its beak positioned so that it could be clipped...as he instructed one of

his sisters...from its base and placed into the bouquet of flowers at his mother's graveside. He could not be there. His hands' work could.

The day came. He paced. He was, as much as a person can be from inside four walls, present in his mind with his mother and his sisters as the machines were turned off and the room changed.

He turned on the television. The image on the screen, at that precise moment, was a small drone shaped into the form of a hummingbird, flying through a vast migration of monarch butterflies ascending in brilliant light.

He had recently encountered the understanding held in some Native American traditions that the migration of monarch butterflies carries the ancestors...that when the butterflies move, they are moving in the company of those who have gone before, carrying souls home. He had been thinking about this in the weeks before his mother's death. And here, at the moment of her death, was a hummingbird flying through ascending monarchs in brilliant sunshine.

We are not in the business of interpreting this for anyone. Whether this was coincidence, synchronicity, the action of something larger, or the mind finding meaning in randomness because it desperately needed to find it...none of those interpretations changes what it did. It gave a man peace in one of the hardest moments of his life. It arrived at exactly the moment it was needed. And it carried, for him, the unmistakable quality of being a message: *I'm good. We're good. Keep going.*

From that point forward, the grief continued...as grief always does, moving in waves, arriving when it arrives,

requiring presence and patience. But it moved through him differently because of that moment. It moved with a sense, however difficult to articulate, that his mother had not simply stopped. That something continued. That the relationship, though transformed entirely, was not ended.

Grief Without Ritual, Ritual Without Presence

The formal mourning that most people rely on...the funeral, the gathering, the explicit communal acknowledgment of loss...was not fully available. But the components of mourning were not entirely absent. They were adapted.

A eulogy was written. Long, careful, honest...the kind of tribute that takes time to compose because it requires actually reckoning with who the person was, what they gave and what their absence means. One of his sisters read it aloud at the service. His words were present even when he was not.

The service itself was documented for him through a continuous chain of short video clips...one person filming thirty seconds and, as they reached the end of their clip, passing to the next person to begin filming immediately, so that the service existed as an almost continuous record he could watch from inside. He watched his mother's funeral in his cell, via a chain of thirty-second videos, as close to real time as the technology allowed. He was in the car with his sister during the funeral procession, through her phone pointed at the window. He was, somehow, there.

These were not adequate substitutes. Let that be said clearly. Being present through a chain of video clips is not the same as being present. Watching your mother's funeral on a small screen in a cell is not the same as standing at the graveside

with your sisters. Nothing about these adaptations should be understood as erasing the deprivation of the original.

What they demonstrate, instead, is the human capacity to find the function of a ritual and preserve it even when the ritual's form cannot be preserved. The function of the funeral is not the physical gathering for its own sake. The function is the explicit, communal acknowledgment of loss...the confirmation that this person lived, that their death matters, that the people who loved them are seen in their grief. All of those functions were preserved. The form was different. The function held.

This is an important insight for anyone who has had to grieve under constrained conditions...which, since the pandemic in particular, includes a great many people. The form of mourning is not sacred. The function is. And the function can be preserved, imperfectly but genuinely, in many different forms.

Let Them Carry You

There is a question about grief that is easy to misframe: how do you carry the people you have lost?

The better question, by the account of the man who has lived with great losses from inside a cell, is: how do you let them carry you?

This is not a semantic distinction. It reflects a genuinely different orientation toward the dead...one that is more active, more present and more sustaining than the image of grief as a burden to be borne.

He does not, by his own description, carry his mother. He does not carry his grandfather. He does not labor under their absence as a weight to be managed. Instead, he experiences their presence as an accompaniment...subtle, ambient, but real.

When he sits down to make something with his hands...to build a small structure from cardboard, to engineer a solution to a practical problem...he is aware of them in those moments. The men in his family, across generations, were engineers and builders. They made things with their hands. When he makes things with his hands, he can feel, or chooses to feel, or finds that without choosing he feels, their recognition. Their approval. Their company.

This is not grief management. It is not a technique. It is the development, over time, of a relationship with loss that acknowledges loss as transformation rather than ending...as a change in the form of the relationship rather than the termination of it. The people who have died are not present in the way they were. But they are not simply gone, either. They persist in the aptitudes they passed on, in the values they modeled, in the specific forms of knowing and making and being that they inhabited and transmitted. When those forms are lived out by the people who loved them, something of the dead is genuinely alive.

Carrying yourself well...maintaining your integrity, pursuing your purpose, honoring the investment that the people who loved you made in your becoming...is the act of keeping them alive in the most practical sense. It is also and this is the part worth sitting with, the act of keeping the relationship alive. Not as memory, though memory is part of it. As ongoing accountability: the sense that the people who loved you can see how you are moving through the world and that their seeing has weight.

This shifts grief from a private burden into a form of continued relationship. It does not eliminate the pain of loss.

But it gives the pain a different character...less the weight of something ended, more the shape of something that has changed form and is asking to be met in its new form.

The Community in Grief

When grief comes in community...when the loss is one person's but the response is collective...something becomes possible that cannot happen in solitude: the grief is witnessed. And witnessed grief, over centuries and across cultures, has been understood as grief that can be survived more fully than grief that is held alone.

The community on death row understood this, even without naming it as such. When Paul lost his mother, the people around him gave him space not because they did not care, but because they understood that what he needed first was the chance to be in his grief privately, to find his own footing before anyone else's presence complicated the experience. They waited. When he came back, he came back on his own terms and the community received him without performance or pressure.

This is bearing witness without intruding. It is presence without the demand that the grieving person manage your feelings about their grief. It is, in a word, respect...for the privacy of deep feeling and the autonomy of the person who is having it.

In the free world, grief is often handled less well than this. The bereaved person is sometimes overwhelmed with immediate, intense, well-meaning attention that asks more of them than they can give...that requires them to receive care when they do not yet have the resources to receive it, to perform gratitude and acknowledgment in the middle of

shock. And then, six months later, when the acute grief has passed its dramatic phase but the real work of integration has only just begun, the attention often evaporates. The people who flooded in during the first week are no longer there. The person is left to do the hardest part of grief...the long, quiet, unglamorous metabolizing of loss into life...largely alone.

Better witness would be less intense in the beginning and more sustained over time. It would follow the grieving person's lead rather than the community's instinct. It would be present without requiring the bereaved person to perform their grief in a recognizable way. This is the practice the death row community arrived at, by necessity and it is one that the free world has much to learn from.

The Practice: Being With What Cannot Be Fixed

Think of a loss in your own life...a person, a relationship, a version of yourself that no longer exists...that you have not fully allowed yourself to grieve. Not because the grief is not there, but because the conditions for it have not presented themselves, or because you have been too busy, or because sitting with it felt like more than you could manage at the time.

Find thirty minutes in the next week. Put your phone away. Sit somewhere quiet. Let yourself think about what you lost. Not to solve it or process it or arrive anywhere specific...just to let it be present with you for thirty minutes, acknowledged and real.

If the grief comes, let it. If it doesn't, simply hold what is held.

Notice whether giving the loss this much attention...deliberately, rather than letting it ambush you in unguarded moments...changes how you carry it.

Chapter 9: Love Through Barriers

Accepting the Distance

One of the first and hardest understandings that sustained incarceration requires is this: the people who love you have their own lives to live and those lives are going to continue, at full pace, regardless of your absence. The world does not pause. Relationships form and dissolve. Children grow. Careers advance. The geography of people's lives shifts. Grief moves through families in complicated patterns and sometimes the grief about you...about your absence, about what might have been, about what your situation means for the people who love you...is too raw and too heavy to be held consciously. So some people deal with it by not dealing with it. By keeping you, for periods of time, out of sight and out of mind. Not because they do not love you. Because the love hurts too much to hold directly.

Understanding this...genuinely understanding it, not just intellectually but in the body, in the place where resentment would otherwise take root...is one of the most demanding acts of love that extended confinement requires.

It is also one of the most important. Because the alternative...interpreting distance as abandonment, reading silence as indifference, building a grievance around every lapsed letter and missed call...produces a prison inside the prison. A man who turns his energy toward the accounting of who has failed him while he is inside has less energy for the relationships that remain and less capacity for the work of his

own life. He is letting the institution win in the domain the institution most wants to win: the domain of the heart.

The acceptance is not resignation. It is not the suppression of longing. It is the decision to hold the relationship...even in its reduced or intermittent form...as the relationship it can currently be, rather than condemning it for not being the relationship it used to be or the relationship you wish it were. This is a practice of active generosity. It is harder than it sounds. It is also, by the account of the man who has practiced it for two decades, one of the things that kept him whole.

What Visits Actually Mean

Visits on death row are conducted under conditions that constrain them in ways that people outside rarely think about. The time is limited. The setting is institutional. The normal texture of family life...the spontaneous, the domestic, the comfortably boring...is replaced by a self-consciousness that can make the limited time feel both precious and slightly unreal.

And yet, by the account of the man who has received them for decades, visits mean something that defies easy description. Not because they provide access to things unavailable otherwise...though they do. But because they provide access to a specific and irreplaceable quality of human interaction: the ordinary intimacy of people who have known each other long enough to be completely themselves together.

The memory offered to illustrate this is not dramatic. It is of his mother, in a visit years ago, playing solitaire on the table between them...absorbed, working through the cards, not quite there. He watched her, knowing she was missing a play. Not saying anything for a moment. And then reaching over and

collapsing the entire layout, just to drive her absolutely crazy. The reaction. The laughter. The mock outrage. The completely comfortable, completely unguarded, completely ordinary moment between a grown man and his mother that could have happened in any living room anywhere.

That moment is what visits mean. Not the conversation about the legal case. Not the explicit expressions of love and support. The being loose together...the shorthand, the humor, the way that only people who share a long history can be with each other. The permission, even in a constrained institutional setting, to simply be family.

This quality of ordinary intimacy is one of the most significant losses of incarceration and it is rarely acknowledged in the usual conversations about what confinement takes from people. What it takes is not only the freedom to move and choose. It is the daily texture of being among people who know you completely, with whom you do not have to perform or explain yourself, in whose company you can be boring or irritable or silly or sad without any of it mattering.

For people outside the walls, this is a reminder of something easily overlooked. The ordinary moments...the ones that will not be photographed or remembered or made into a story...are not the background of the important ones. They are the substance. They are what the relationships are made of. The spontaneous, unremarkable, comfortable ordinariness of being with people you love is not a gap between the meaningful moments. It is the meaning.

Treat it accordingly.

The Architecture of Love at a Distance

How do you love someone well when you cannot be with them? This is a question that distance and incarceration force into sharp focus, but it is not a question exclusive to those conditions. It is asked...or should be asked...by anyone whose love is separated from its object by geography, by circumstance, by illness, by the ordinary drift that time and busy lives produce.

The answer developed through decades of practice in an extreme version of this situation is both simple and demanding: you show up when you can, in whatever form showing up currently takes, without apology for the fact that it cannot be more.

The mistake most people make, when distance has grown and contact has lapsed, is to compound the distance with guilt. They stay silent longer than they should because reaching out feels inadequate given how long they have been absent. They put off the call because they don't know how to address the gap. They write long, elaborate messages full of apology for everything they have not done before finally saying the simple thing they wanted to say. The apology is real and the impulse behind it is genuine. But it also makes the communication about the giver rather than the receiver...about managing the guilt of absence rather than simply offering what presence is currently available.

The practice that matters more: a few lines, when a few lines are what you have. A brief call when a brief call is possible. The small gesture, offered without preface or apology, that says: I thought of you. I wanted you to know. The people on the receiving end of these gestures...and Paul has been on the receiving end for decades...are not measuring the quality of

your love by the length of your messages or the consistency of your contact. They are measuring it by whether you show up at all. A few lines is showing up. It is enough.

This is the practice of love at distance as it has been received and observed from inside: the people whose love has mattered most are not the ones who have written the most or called the most or offered the most elaborate expressions of care. They are the ones who have been consistent...who have, across years, sent the message or made the call or passed along the small gesture that says: you are still in my life. Even from here. Even now. You are not forgotten.

What Sustained Correspondence Builds

Over twelve years, through letters and calls and occasional visits, a family on another continent has built with Paul a relationship of remarkable depth. He knows the names and personalities and current situations of children who were young when the correspondence began and who are now adults making their own lives. He knows the history of both families on both sides...the stories, the losses, the particular ways that different generations have moved through the world. He knows the texture of their ordinary daily life with a specificity that most people do not have about their own neighbors.

They came to see him. Not briefly, not once, but with the commitment of people who understood that crossing an ocean to sit across from someone in a constrained institutional setting was worth doing because the relationship warranted it. The visit happened in the context of a relationship already substantial...already built into something real through years of correspondence. The physical meeting was confirmation, not introduction.

What this relationship demonstrates, more completely than any theoretical argument could, is the depth of human connection that sustained and honest correspondence can produce. Not the deep connection that requires years of shared physical space and accumulated spontaneous experience...that is real and irreplaceable. But a different kind of deep connection: one built deliberately through the careful attention that writing requires, through the discipline of articulating what you think and feel and wonder and notice, through the mutual willingness to be known across a medium that strips away the shortcuts of physical presence.

The letter cannot rely on facial expression or body language or the shared context of a physical place. It has to say what it means in words. This constraint, which most people experience as a limitation, is also what makes sustained correspondence, when both parties take it seriously, a laboratory of genuine mutual knowing. You learn, through writing, what you think. You learn, through their replies, who they are. You learn, through the accumulation of exchanges over years, something that is surprisingly difficult to learn any other way: that this person, whom you know only through words, is genuinely real to you...and you to them.

That kind of knowing is worth more than most people understand until they experience it. And it is available to anyone who is willing to write the letter.

The Simple Discipline of Showing Up

Love, practiced across barriers of any kind, reduces finally to this: showing up. Not perfectly. Not constantly. Not in the ways you wish you could. In the ways you actually can, offered

with the consistency that says: you are worth the effort of staying in contact with.

Most people, when they examine their relationships honestly, will find a number of people they love...genuinely love...with whom they have let contact lapse in ways that do not reflect the love they feel. The days passed. The weeks passed. The gap became uncomfortable and the discomfort was managed by not thinking about it. The relationship exists in the heart but has not been expressed in action for longer than the heart would approve if asked.

The remedy is not dramatic. It is the message sent tonight. The call made this week. The brief expression of genuine regard, offered without elaborate preamble, that says: I thought about you and I wanted you to know I did.

From inside a death row cell, with severely limited access to communication, with phone time that costs money and letters that take days, with visits that require the other person to travel and submit to institutional procedures...the effort of maintaining connection is objectively greater than anything most people reading this book will ever face. And it happens. The effort is made. The connection is sustained.

You have email. You have a phone that is with you every waking hour. You have the ability to reach anyone you know within thirty seconds. The infrastructure of connection is so thoroughly available that its abundance may actually be part of the problem...when connection can be made effortlessly, its urgency diminishes. It can always happen later. It is always easy. And because it is always easy, it becomes the kind of thing you always mean to do.

Do it now. Close this book for a moment. Think of the person you have been meaning to reach. Send them something real...three lines, a voice message, a brief expression of genuine regard. Do it before the thought dissolves into intention and intention dissolves into nothing.

Then come back. We have more to talk about.

The Practice: The Consistent Gesture

Identify three people you love who you have been less present for than you intend to be.

Over the next three months, make one small genuine gesture of contact with each of them every three to four weeks. Not a large gesture...a few lines is enough. A brief call. A specific memory or observation you want to share with them. Something that says: I thought of you and acted on the thought.

Three people. One gesture each. Every few weeks. For three months.

At the end of three months, evaluate what has changed in those three relationships...not from any single gesture, but from the accumulated signal of consistent presence.

Then decide whether to continue.

End of Part III

Part IV: The Spirit...Meaning at the Edge

We have arrived at the part of this book that is the hardest to write and, we suspect, the hardest to read...not because the subject matter is more painful than what has come before, but because it is the most resistant to clear articulation. The body can be described in terms of function and practice. The mind can be described in terms of cognition and habit. Even the heart, with all its complexity, submits to the language of relationship and emotion. But the spirit resists clean description. It does not operate in terms that translate easily into bullet points or actionable steps.

And yet it is the foundation of everything else.

Every practice in this book...the breathing, the movement, the cooking with attention, the deliberate engagement with time, the cultivation of deep connection, the maintenance of relationships across barriers...rests on something underneath it. Something that provides the reason to do any of it. Something that answers, when the hard question is asked in the dark hours, the question of why it is worth continuing to be a person who practices these things. Why it is worth the effort of remaining whole when everything around you is designed to make you less than whole.

That something is what we are calling the spirit. Not in a narrowly religious sense...Paul has a complicated and highly personal relationship with organized religion and would resist any tidy theological label. But in the sense of the animating force underneath a life: the interior fire that keeps a man

getting up in the morning in a cell where nothing external would require him to get up with any particular quality of presence or intention.

On death row, the spiritual question is not abstract. It is pressed into sharpness by the same extreme conditions that have sharpened every other dimension of what this book is about. What do you believe about the nature of reality? What do you believe about what happens after death? What do you believe about why your life matters when the state has decided it should end? These questions do not remain theoretical in the face of a death sentence. They demand answers. And the quality of those answers...the depth to which they are genuinely held rather than merely professed...determines whether a man can remain whole in the years it takes for the legal system to run its course.

The chapters in this section are about what it looks like to build and maintain a genuine spiritual life in conditions of extremity...a life that is honest about what it does not know, that draws from many traditions without being captured by any, that finds its primary expression not in doctrine but in how a man moves through his days. They are also about the specific and demanding spiritual work of facing one's past honestly, taking genuine responsibility for who one has been and building an ongoing life oriented toward something worth building toward.

These are not exclusively death row questions. They are human questions. The only difference is that death row forces them.

Chapter 10: God in the Cell

The Rejection That Comes First

Most people who arrive at a genuine spiritual life arrive through a period of rejection. Not rejection of the spiritual impulse itself...that impulse is too deeply woven into human nature to be eliminated by argument or bad experience. But rejection of the particular forms in which spirituality was first presented, which are so often inadequate to the actual complexity of the inner life that they produce, almost inevitably, a period of total disavowal before something more genuinely personal can be built.

For Paul, the rejection was both early and complete. Spirituality as it arrived in his youth arrived always as someone else's opinion...delivered with the authority of absolute certainty, organized around specific beliefs that had to be adopted wholesale, excluding other possibilities from the start. The implicit or explicit message was that there was one correct framework for understanding the divine and that the proper response to that framework was compliance rather than inquiry.

Something in him resisted this from the beginning. Not the spiritual question...never the question. The insistence that the question had already been answered and that his job was only to accept the answer. That insistence felt and was, a form of intellectual and spiritual coercion. And the rejection of coercion, which has been one of the most consistent features of this particular life, applied here as fully as anywhere else. If

what you are offering me requires me to stop thinking, we have a problem.

This is, we want to say clearly, a healthy resistance. One of the most consistent findings across the study of genuine spiritual development is that the people who arrive at the most durable and authentic spiritual lives almost universally pass through a phase of rejection...of the inherited frameworks, the received answers, the doctrines absorbed before the inner life had sufficient complexity to evaluate them honestly. This rejection is not a detour from the spiritual path. It is, for many people, the first step on it. The inherited framework has to be cleared away before something that is genuinely yours can be built in its place.

The clearing took years. Through the twenties, spirituality was simply not something being actively engaged. The more immediate demands of life...and then the more immediate demands of fighting for that life inside the legal system...consumed what attention and energy were available. There was no deliberate spiritual life and no particular sense that this was a gap.

Finding the Framework That Fits

Sometime in his thirties, the engagement began to change. Not through any dramatic conversion experience or crisis of faith...nothing so tidy. Through the slow accumulation of reading, reflection and the particular kind of thinking that becomes possible when the noise of ordinary life is significantly reduced. In conditions of enforced stillness, questions that had been successfully avoided in a busier life became harder to avoid. What do you believe about where you come from? What do you believe about where you are going? What do you

believe about the relationship between the self that exists in this body and the something-larger that the self exists within?

The frameworks that began to feel resonant were not the ones that had been offered in youth. They came from two sources that initially seemed very different and turned out to share something essential: Native American spiritual traditions and Norse mythology.

What drew him to Native American spirituality was its emphasis on connection...to ancestors, to nature, to a continuity of belonging that runs through time and across the division between the living and the dead. The idea that the people who came before you are not simply gone...that they persist in a relationship with the living, that their presence can be felt and their guidance can be sought, that you are not alone in the sense that matters most...landed with particular force in conditions designed to make a man feel absolutely, categorically alone.

What drew him to Norse mythology was something parallel: a framework in which the individual life is understood as part of a larger story that extends both backward and forward in time, in which the quality of how you live matters because it leaves a mark on something larger than yourself and in which the relationship between the living and the dead is not a final severance but an ongoing connection. Different surface, same essential structure.

He did not adopt either tradition wholesale. He did not convert. What he did was something more interesting and more honest: he found in both traditions the elements that corresponded to something true in his own experience and he allowed those elements to inform his understanding of his

own life. He melded them into something that was neither one nor the other but genuinely his own...a personal spiritual framework that was built from genuine resonance rather than institutional affiliation.

The organizing center of that framework is the ancestors. The sense that the people who came before him...his grandfather, his mother, the men and women across generations whose lives made his possible...are present in some form, aware of how he is carrying himself, capable of something like recognition and pride or its absence. This is not a belief he arrived at through argument. It is a belief he arrived at through experience: through the felt sense, accumulated across years, that there is an audience for his life that extends beyond the people currently alive and that his accountability runs toward that audience as much as toward any living person.

This belief has practical consequences. How you carry yourself when the outcome is uncertain, when the institution is working against you, when the day is hard and the temptation to stop trying is real...all of this is shaped, for him, by the question: would the people watching from wherever they are watching from be proud of this? That question is not rhetorical. It is operational. It makes a difference to how the day is actually lived.

The Buffet of Traditions

Death row houses men of many faiths and no faith. Christianity in several varieties. Islam. Native American traditions. Atheism. The entire spectrum of human spiritual response to the fundamental questions is present in a condensed space and men who would never otherwise spend significant time in each other's company are placed in

proximity with each other's beliefs, practices and spiritual expressions.

This could be a source of conflict. It sometimes is. But it can also be and in the best instances is, something more interesting: a living education in the range of ways that human beings have found to engage the spiritual question. You do not have to leave your own cell to hear someone else's prayers. You do not have to travel anywhere to observe a practice utterly unlike your own. The diversity is simply there, available for whatever attention you choose to give it.

The orientation that has served this particular man best is one of respectful non-interference. He observes. He is genuinely interested in what other traditions offer...not to adopt them, but to understand them. A man practicing Islam on the row is not a threat to his spiritual framework and is not an invitation to debate or conversion in either direction. He is a person with his own path, walking it with evident seriousness and that seriousness is worthy of respect independent of the specific content of the path.

This is a harder posture to maintain than it sounds. The temptation, when you have arrived at a genuine spiritual understanding that works for you, is to regard that understanding as universally applicable...to want to share it, to want to persuade others to it, to interpret other people's different paths as errors to be corrected rather than legitimate expressions of the same underlying human need. That temptation is the source of most religious conflict in human history and it is as present in a death row cell as it is anywhere else.

Resisting it requires a distinction between believing that your own path is true for you and believing that your own path is the only true one. The first belief is necessary...you cannot walk a path you do not believe in. The second is the error. It is possible and in fact necessary for genuine spiritual maturity, to hold your own convictions with full seriousness while also holding the genuine respect for other people's convictions that only comes from understanding that the deepest spiritual question...what is the nature of this life and what does it ask of me?...is real and difficult enough that no single tradition holds all the answer.

What God Looks Like in the Dark

When asked what spiritual experience looks like in conditions of extreme suffering...when the food is inadequate, when the legal situation is uncertain, when the institution is doing what the institution does...the answer is both simpler and more surprising than most people expect.

It looks like not wilting.

This is not a heroic claim. It is a description of something specific and observable: the state of a person whose core has not been destabilized by the pressures working on the surface. Not unaffected...the pressures are real and their effects are real. But not destabilized. The center holds. The self that exists underneath the circumstance remains recognizably itself. Bright-eyed, as he puts it. The same person who walked in, with some additional damage and some additional wisdom, but essentially continuous.

Most people, hearing someone describe their experience of spiritual life in extreme suffering, expect to hear about crisis...the dark night of the soul, the shattering of belief, the

desperate reaching for something to hold onto. Those experiences are real and documented across religious literature. But they are not universal. There is another pattern, less dramatic and less frequently described: the person whose spiritual life did not begin with crisis because it was built in advance of crisis, through daily practice and genuine engagement, until it was structural rather than decorative. When the storm comes for a structural element, the response is different than when it comes for a decorative one.

The spiritual life built in that cell was not built against crisis. It was built as the ordinary texture of daily existence...the regular turning toward something larger than the immediate circumstance, the regular acknowledgment of the ancestors, the regular practice of carrying oneself in a way that would honor the people watching. By the time the heaviest pressure came, the structure was already there.

This is the argument for spiritual practice built in ordinary times, before the extraordinary ones arrive. The spiritual life you build when things are relatively well is the foundation you stand on when things are not. Building that foundation during a crisis...reaching for spiritual resources at the moment they are most needed, without having built them when they were less urgently needed...is possible, but it is harder. The resources are thinner. The foundation is shakier.

Build it now. In whatever form fits your own genuine engagement with the spiritual question. Before you need it in the way that will one day be unavoidable.

The God You Cannot Define

Perhaps the most honest and most useful thing to be said about the spiritual life that has sustained this particular man is that it does not claim to know what it cannot know.

There is something larger. He is confident of this...not on the basis of argument, but on the basis of accumulated experience: the moment the hummingbird appeared on the screen. The felt sense of his ancestors' presence. The unmistakable quality of certain moments that seem to carry a meaning exceeding anything random coincidence could produce. These experiences do not add up to a doctrine. They add up to a conviction: that the visible world is not the whole world and that what persists beyond it is not nothing.

But what it is, precisely...what the something-larger is, whether it has a name, whether it can be addressed directly, whether it corresponds to any of the named deities in any of the world's traditions...that, he will not claim to know. Not because the question doesn't matter. Because intellectual honesty requires acknowledging that the answer is genuinely unknown and that pretending otherwise...adopting a certainty about the ultimate nature of things that no human being is actually in a position to have...is a form of spiritual dishonesty that tends to make the spiritual life smaller rather than larger.

The God you cannot fully define is, paradoxically, a bigger God than the one you can. The willingness to hold the spiritual question genuinely open...to live inside the mystery rather than resolving it prematurely into doctrine...is not spiritual weakness. It is the kind of honesty that creates space for genuine encounter. You cannot be surprised by something you have already decided you know. You cannot be genuinely moved by what you have already contained in a category. The

spiritual life that holds the mystery open is the one most capable of being genuinely inhabited.

The Practice: The Question You Actually Have

Most people have a genuine spiritual question that they have not examined carefully because examining it has felt either presumptuous or dangerous.

What is it for you? Not the question you have been told to have. Not the question that fits the tradition you were raised in. The question that actually lives in you when you are quiet enough to hear it.

Write it down. Not the answer...the question. In whatever words fit it honestly, even if those words are uncertain or inarticulate.

Sit with the question for ten minutes. Do not try to answer it. Do not try to resolve it. Simply let it be what it is: a real question, held honestly, in the full acknowledgment that you do not yet know the answer.

This is the beginning of a genuine spiritual life, whatever form it eventually takes.

Chapter 11: Redemption and Reckoning

The Inventory of the Past

There is a particular kind of honesty that is required for genuine psychological and spiritual health and it is among the rarest. It is the willingness to look at your past...not at the dramatic events, the obvious failures, the catalogued regrets...but at the ordinary texture of who you were in your relationships: whether you actually showed the people you loved that you loved them, whether you made good on the faith people placed in you, whether you were as present and as generous and as attentive as the people in your life deserved.

Most people, performing this inventory honestly, will find gaps. Not because they are bad people, but because being fully present to the people around you...genuinely seeing them, genuinely engaging with them, consistently expressing the love and regard you actually feel...is demanding in ways that the busy rush of ordinary life makes easy to shortchange. The love was there. The expression of it was intermittent, distracted, compressed by everything else competing for attention.

On death row, with the absence of that rushing ordinary life, those gaps become visible with a clarity that is uncomfortable to sit with. The man at the center of this book describes a particular inventory that happened in the early years of his incarceration: the dawning recognition, with the distance that the cell provided, that he had not fully shown up for the people who loved him, even when they were physically close. That he had moved through relationships that mattered

enormously to him without consistently communicating that they mattered. That the people who believed in him most had not always been given strong evidence for their belief.

This recognition did not arrive as self-flagellation. It arrived as clarity. And clarity, however uncomfortable, is preferable to the alternative: the comfortable haze of never quite looking, never quite reckoning with the gap between who you intended to be and who you actually were.

The capacity to look at this clearly...without collapsing into shame or defending against the recognition with justifications...is one of the most important skills this chapter is about. Genuine reckoning requires neither self-destruction nor self-protection. It requires only the willingness to see what is true, hold it without flinching and ask what follows from it.

The Moment That Changed the Frame

Among the moments of recognition that the early years of incarceration produced, one arrived with particular force through an unexpected source: a documentary about a musician named Peter Green.

Some years before his incarceration, in seventh grade, a teacher had said something to him that landed and then buried itself...too opaque in the moment to understand, too significant to fully disappear. The teacher looked at him and said, roughly: you're the White Pete Green, but you're too dumb to know what I'm telling you.

At the time, the words made no sense. He did not know who Pete Green was. He did not know what the comparison meant. He registered the sting of the word *dumb* and dismissed the rest, because you dismiss what you cannot yet decode.

A decade later, in a cell, he watched a documentary about Peter Green...the gifted, mercurial, ultimately tragic founding guitarist of Fleetwood Mac, a figure of extraordinary natural talent whose gifts were never fully matched by the structures around him that would have helped him use them well and who spent years of his life in circumstances that prevented those gifts from reaching their fullest expression.

Watching the documentary, understanding now what he could not understand in seventh grade, the teacher's words came back with their full weight. The teacher had seen in him...in a seventh-grade boy with obvious gifts and no clear direction...a parallel to that particular kind of squandered potential. Had seen it clearly enough to name it, in terms specific enough to be meaningful and opaque enough that they might have to be unlocked years later. And had been right.

The recognition that followed was not self-pity. It was something more exacting: the genuine acknowledgment that there had been a different path available. Not a guaranteed path...life offers no guarantees...but a path that corresponded more fully to who he actually was and what he was actually capable of. A path on which the gifts he discovered in the cell might have been discovered earlier and expressed in ways that changed more lives, including his own.

This is among the hardest things a person can honestly reckon with: not the mistakes made in bad moments, but the potential not fully honored in good ones. The talent not developed. The opportunities not taken. The people not sufficiently served by whatever you had to offer. The life that might have been if you had understood yourself and your situation clearly enough to make different choices.

That reckoning is not productive if it produces only regret. Regret that does not transform into intention is just self-punishment with no constructive output. What is productive about this particular reckoning...what lifted it out of the realm of mere regret...was the clarity it produced about what comes next. If the past was a failure to honor a responsibility, the future is an opportunity to honor it. Not by undoing what cannot be undone, but by doing, from here forward, what the past version of yourself did not do. By being, in whatever circumstances remain available, the person the teacher already saw.

The mission that emerged from this recognition is specific and held with real conviction: to come out of this situation armed with what has been learned inside it and to spend whatever comes next in genuine service of the people whose belief he did not fully honor. Not to say he will do better. To do it. To sew it rather than say it...to let the doing be the evidence, not the promise.

What Responsibility Actually Looks Like

The language of personal responsibility is one of the most abused in common usage. It gets invoked to dismiss structural inequity, to punish people for circumstances largely beyond their control and to demand a performance of contrition that has nothing to do with genuine change. In this context, we want to be careful and specific about what we mean.

Genuine responsibility is not the performance of guilt. It is not the elaborate public accounting of one's failures offered in service of social redemption. It is not the conversion narrative deployed to demonstrate worthiness of better treatment. All

of these are, at root, more about the audience than about the person performing them.

Genuine responsibility is simpler and less glamorous: it is the decision to become, through sustained daily practice, the person who does not do the thing you are taking responsibility for. It is the decision to honor, through how you actually live, the people you let down. It is the choice to let your changed behavior be the evidence of your changed understanding, rather than your changed understanding be its own evidence.

This is harder than it sounds and slower. There is no dramatic moment of transformation that resolves everything. There is only the accumulation of days in which you make different choices than you made before...in which you express the love you feel rather than assuming it is understood, in which you show up for the people who have invested in you, in which you use whatever gifts you have in service of something beyond your own immediate interest.

On death row, with severely limited access to the people and the world that responsibility demands reaching toward, this work has to happen in constrained forms. It happens through the letter that tells the truth someone needs to hear. Through the conversation that challenges rather than flatters. Through the commitment to coming out of this situation genuinely changed...genuinely more capable of honoring what has been invested in you...rather than merely surviving it. The work itself happens inside. The proof will have to wait for whatever comes after.

For people outside these walls, the responsibility is both harder and easier. Harder because the ordinary rush of life provides excellent cover for not doing the work...there is always

a reason to defer, always a more pressing claim on your attention. Easier because the people you owe it to are accessible. You can reach them. You can express the regard you feel. You can show up in ways that cost something real but are actually available to you to offer.

The inventory question...the one worth sitting with honestly...is not what you have done wrong. It is who you have not fully shown up for and what it would mean to begin doing that now.

Atonement as Orientation, Not Event

Religious and secular traditions alike tend to treat atonement as an event: a moment of confession, a ceremony of forgiveness, a ritual marking of the transition from the person who did the wrong thing to the person who has made it right. These rituals serve genuine functions. But they can also, when misused, allow people to discharge the feeling of responsibility without doing the actual work that the feeling is pointing toward.

The model of atonement that has developed from this particular experience is not event-based. It is orientation-based: a sustained directional commitment of the self toward honoring what has been dishonored, expressed not in any single dramatic moment but in the texture of daily living over years.

This is less satisfying, in one sense, than the event model. It does not provide a clear before-and-after, a ceremony of completion, a moment at which you can exhale and know it is done. It is always ongoing. There is no finish line at which the responsibility is discharged and the account is settled. There is only the question, asked each day: Am I carrying myself in a

way that honors the people who invested in me? Am I making good on what was given me...the gifts, the relationships, the opportunities, the second chances...by using it in genuine service of something beyond myself?

In another sense, this model is more satisfying...because it is real. The event model produces a performance. The orientation model produces a life. And a life genuinely lived in the direction of atonement...a life in which the daily choices, accumulated across years, constitute a meaningful and legible answer to the question of who you are...is worth more than any ceremony.

The test, as always, is not what you say about yourself. It is what you do, consistently, when nobody is watching and nothing external requires you to do the better thing. That is where the atonement is actually built or not built. That is where the self is actually formed or not formed. Everything else is commentary.

The Practice: The Honest Inventory

Set aside thirty minutes without interruption.

Write down, as honestly as you can, two or three relationships in which you have not fully shown up...in which the love or regard you feel has not been consistently expressed in action. Not the dramatic failures. The ordinary, accumulated shortfalls of presence and attention and expression.

For each one, write a single sentence about what showing up more fully would actually look like. Not a grand gesture. The specific, small, daily practice that would constitute genuine change.

Then do one of those things this week. Not as performance. As evidence to yourself that you have looked honestly and responded to what you saw.

Chapter 12: Hope Without Guarantees

The Problem With Conditional Hope

Most people's hope is conditional. It is hope organized around specific outcomes: the test comes back clean, the relationship repairs itself, the job comes through, the verdict goes the right way. This kind of hope is real and we do not want to dismiss it...the desire for specific good outcomes is a basic and legitimate feature of human psychology. But it is also fragile in a specific way: it is entirely dependent on the circumstances delivering what the hope requires. When the circumstances do not deliver...when the test comes back wrong, when the relationship cannot be repaired, when the verdict is unjust...conditional hope collapses. And the person whose hope was organized around a specific outcome is left not just without the outcome but without the hope itself.

Death row makes the fragility of conditional hope impossible to ignore. The specific desired outcome...release, exoneration, the overturning of an unjust sentence...is genuinely uncertain. The legal process is long. The individual moments within it produce hope and then dash it with what feels like indifference to the human stakes involved. If hope lived or died with each legal development, it would be in a constant state of collapse and reconstruction. No one can sustain that over two decades. No one should have to.

The hope that has sustained the life at the center of this book is not organized around outcomes. It is organized around agency...around the conviction that regardless of what the

circumstances eventually produce, what he does with the circumstances he currently has is genuinely within his authority and genuinely matters. That conviction, held alongside the clear-eyed acknowledgment that the outcome is uncertain, is a form of hope that cannot be collapsed by any single development. It does not depend on the circumstances delivering anything in particular. It depends only on continuing to be someone who acts on what can be influenced, regardless of what cannot.

Certainty and Uncertainty, Held Together

Death row involves a particular and unusual combination of certainty and uncertainty that most people in the free world never experience in this particular form. The routine is highly certain: meals at fixed times, count at fixed intervals, the same wing, the same cell, the same sequence of institutional days. At the level of daily life, very little surprises. The uncertainty lies elsewhere...in the legal process, in the timeline, in the ultimate outcome of a situation in which the state has stated its intention clearly and the individual is engaged in the long work of demonstrating that the state is wrong.

Living with that combination...knowing exactly what today will look like while not knowing whether there will be a different kind of tomorrow...requires a particular kind of psychological dexterity. The immediate future is legible. The larger future is not. Most people in the free world have approximately the opposite problem: they have significant uncertainty in their immediate future and a general sense that the larger future, while unknown, is likely to include more of the good things that have characterized the life so far.

The dexterity required on death row is the capacity to be genuinely present in the certain immediate while not being paralyzed by the uncertain larger. This is, at its root, the practice that contemplative traditions call *being present*...the capacity to fully inhabit the day that actually exists rather than spending that day in anticipation of or dread about a future day that has not yet arrived.

The practice, in the cell, is direct: whatever cannot be controlled gets no time. Not because the uncontrollable outcomes don't matter...they matter enormously. But because time spent thinking about what you cannot influence is time taken from what you can. And the work that can be influenced...the legal fight, the relationships being maintained, the body being kept capable, the mind being kept sharp...demands attention that it cannot afford to share with the exhausting, circular labor of worrying about what is not within reach.

This reallocation of attention is not achieved through denial. It is not the pretense that the uncertain future does not exist or that its stakes are not real. It is the honest acknowledgment that thinking about it accomplishes nothing, followed by the equally honest redirection of energy toward what thinking can actually accomplish. These are different things and the difference is the whole game.

The Hardwired Orientation

When asked whether hope requires a daily renewal...whether it is something that has to be chosen each morning, maintained through effort, defended against the attritions that daily institutional life produces...the answer is immediate and unequivocal: no.

It is not a choice that has to be consciously made each day. It is simply the way the mind is oriented. Not toward the thing that cannot be controlled, but toward the thing that can. Not toward the executioner somewhere in an indeterminate future, but toward the agenda that is immediate and actionable and genuinely worth the best that a person has to give. The orientation is structural. It does not need to be refreshed.

This is important to understand, because the conventional narrative about hope in difficult circumstances often frames it as a heroic daily act...the choice to keep going despite everything, renewed each morning against the pressure of despair. That framing, while emotionally resonant, is not quite accurate to how the thing actually works at its most functional level.

At its most functional level, hope is not a heroic act. It is a habit. It is the settled disposition of a mind that has been trained, through years of consistent practice, to orient toward what can be done rather than what cannot be helped. Like all habits, it was built through repetition...through the daily, accumulated choice to put attention on the actionable rather than the uncontrollable, until that choice became the default rather than the exception.

This means, in practical terms, that hope is something you build during ordinary times through ordinary practice, not something you summon during crises through extraordinary effort. The daily practice of redirecting attention from what cannot be influenced to what can...practiced in the small decisions of an ordinary day, when the stakes are not yet high...trains the mind to perform that redirection

automatically when the stakes become very high indeed. By the time the crisis arrives, the habit is already established.

Living Toward Rather Than Living Against

There is a distinction between two fundamentally different orientations toward difficult circumstances that this book has been circling around without naming directly until now. It is time to name it.

One orientation is reactive: it defines itself primarily in terms of what it is resisting. Against the institution. Against the injustice. Against the system that would reduce a person to their sentence. Against the circumstances that are trying to take everything. This orientation has energy. It has clarity of a certain kind. It produces the defiance that is real and sometimes necessary.

But it is also, in the long run, depleting. Because it requires the thing you are against to remain present and powerful in order for the orientation to maintain its coherence. The person defined primarily by what they are resisting is, paradoxically, dependent on the thing they are resisting. Take it away, or let it recede and the identity organized around resistance loses its organizing principle.

The other orientation is generative: it defines itself primarily in terms of what it is building toward. Not against the institution but toward the legal exoneration that will make the institution's grip irrelevant. Not against the injustice but toward the life on the other side of it that will be lived fully and well. Not against the circumstances but toward the person these circumstances have been, against every expectation, revealing and developing.

This orientation is more durable than the reactive one, because what it is living toward does not depend on the adversary remaining present and powerful. It maintains its coherence whether the circumstances are improving or worsening. It is not less honest about the difficulty of the situation...it looks directly at the cold hard facts, as clearly as any reactive orientation does. But it looks at them as the terrain to be navigated rather than the enemy to be defeated. And navigation is a more sustainable posture than combat.

The life at the center of this book is built on this generative orientation. The question that organizes each day is not *how do I survive what they are doing to me* but *what am I doing with this time and these circumstances to build something worth building*. The legal fight is part of that building. The relationships are part of it. The body kept capable and the mind kept sharp and the spirit kept intact are all part of it. All of it points toward...toward the life on the other side, toward the person who will walk out of here if walking out becomes possible, toward the impact that can still be had on the people whose lives intersect with this one.

That orientation...toward rather than against...is what we mean by hope that does not depend on guarantees.

When the Future Is Genuinely Unclear

We want to address honestly something that the preceding pages might have made sound easier than it is. Maintaining a generative orientation toward an uncertain future...staying hopeful in the genuine sense while also being clear-eyed about the real possibility that the desired outcome will not materialize...is not comfortable. It is not painless. There are moments of darkness that the practices of this book do not

prevent. There are conversations with oneself in the quiet hours that are not resolved neatly and that leave more uncertainty than they arrived with.

This is true and it would be dishonest to suggest otherwise. What the practices do...what decades of living them have produced...is not the elimination of difficult interior weather. It is the building of a self sturdy enough to be moved by that weather without being destroyed by it. The grief comes. The fear comes. The doubt comes. The recognition of all that has been lost and all that might yet be lost arrives with full force at various hours. The practices do not prevent this. They make it survivable. They make it possible to feel what is real without being defined by it, to be moved without being swept away, to let the weather pass through rather than installing it as a permanent resident.

This is the most honest thing we can say about hope in conditions of genuine uncertainty: it does not protect you from the weight of not knowing. It equips you to carry the weight without being flattened by it. It is not the absence of fear. It is the presence of something that can hold alongside fear and not be overwhelmed.

The something that holds is what this entire section has been about: the spirit. The interior fire. The sense of accountability to something larger than the immediate circumstances. The conviction, arrived at through practice and sustained through daily living, that the self is not finally reducible to what has been done to it...that there is a core that the Department of Punishment has not reached and, if properly tended, will not reach.

That conviction is not a guarantee. Nothing in this book offers guarantees. What it offers is something more practically useful than a guarantee: a set of practices for building, in whatever circumstances you are actually in, a self capable of being genuinely and durably well. Not because the circumstances become good. Because the self becomes capable.

That is the foundation of hope that does not require guarantees: not the certainty that things will go well, but the certainty...earned through practice, demonstrated through years...that you are capable of being fully alive regardless of how they go.

The Agenda That Demands Everything

There is a phrase that Paul uses to describe his relationship to the future and we want to close this chapter with it because it captures something essential.

My agenda demands all my thoughts.

Not the institution's agenda. Not the state's agenda. Not the agenda that uncertainty and fear would set for the mind if they were given authority over it. His agenda: the legal fight, the relationships, the body, the mind, the spirit, the ongoing construction of a life worth living from wherever that life currently has to be lived.

That agenda is full. It is demanding. It takes everything a capable, engaged, fully present mind can give it. There is no room in it for the extended rehearsal of what cannot be controlled, no space for the entropy of unfocused days, no tolerance for the quiet surrender that passes for pragmatism when the circumstances are hard enough.

This is not workaholism. It is not the compulsive busyness that many people use to avoid the interior life. It is something

different: the genuine, full inhabitation of a life organized around purpose. The sense that what I am doing with today matters...that the legal work is consequential, that the relationships are real, that the body kept capable is kept capable for something, that the spirit tended faithfully is pointed at something worth pointing at.

Most people in the free world do not live with this quality of full inhabitation. They live with portions of themselves...giving some to work, some to family, some to entertainment, keeping some in reserve out of fear or fatigue or the low-grade uncertainty about whether full investment is warranted. They hold back. They hedge. They reserve judgment about whether the life they are currently living is worth the full weight of their attention and engagement.

The man on death row has, in a sense, been given no choice but to decide. Holding back accomplishes nothing. Hedging changes nothing. Waiting for better circumstances to arrive before fully inhabiting the one available life is not available as a strategy when the circumstances are this extreme and this unchangeable. Either you inhabit the life you have, fully, or you do not inhabit it at all. And inhabiting it fully...with all of yourself, against all of the institution's considerable efforts to make that inhabitation impossible...is the only meaningful act of resistance available.

Your life, wherever it currently is, deserves your full inhabitation. Not the life you might have. Not the life you expected. The one you are actually in. The agenda it presents...the relationships, the work, the body, the spirit, the ongoing construction of a self worth being...deserves all your thoughts.

Give it all of them.

The Practice: What Are You Living Toward?

Take fifteen minutes with this question...not the question of what you are hoping to avoid or escape, but what you are actively building toward.

What is the life, the relationship, the version of yourself, the contribution to other people that you are orienting your daily choices toward? Not the fantasy version...the specific, grounded, genuinely achievable version that is one decision at a time within your reach.

Write it down in three sentences or fewer. Not a vision board. Three honest sentences about what you are living toward.

Then ask yourself: does how you spent yesterday reflect that? Does how you intend to spend tomorrow?

If not...not in judgment, just in clear observation...what is one thing you could adjust?

End of Part IV

Part V: Lessons for the Outside World

We have been in difficult territory for four sections of this book. We have talked about confinement and breath, about movement in a cage, about food prepared in a sink. We have talked about time without a horizon, grief without ritual, love across barriers that most people will never face. We have talked about the spirit and its construction in conditions of radical deprivation.

Now we want to turn outward. We want to look directly at the world most people reading this book actually inhabit...the world of relative freedom, of overscheduled days and understimulated evenings, of wellness that gets marketed to them while remaining somehow just out of reach. We want to bring what we have learned from the extreme case to bear on the ordinary one, because that is what this book has always been for.

The extreme case is not the point. It is the proof of concept. When you watch a practice hold under the most punishing conditions you can imagine, you learn something about the practice that you could not learn by observing it under comfortable conditions. You learn what it is actually made of. You learn which parts of it are essential and which parts are the ambient cushioning that comfortable conditions provide. You learn, in the starkest possible terms, what actually works and what was only working because the conditions were favorable enough to carry the weight.

Everything in the previous four sections held under conditions that were not favorable. It held in a six-by-nine cell. It held across two decades without a certain horizon. It held through losses that could not be grieved in the conventional ways, through a legal fight that would exhaust most people in months, through an institutional machinery whose explicit purpose was the reduction of the person to their sentence.

What held is what matters. And what held is available to you.

These three chapters are about the translation...about what the lessons of the extreme case actually mean for the person living in the ordinary one. They are about rethinking what freedom means, what wellness requires and how the four pillars...simplicity, reflection, connection and purpose...become a daily practice rather than a set of ideas.

Chapter 13: What They Teach Us About Wellness

The Shallow Version

The wellness industry, as it currently exists, is built on a foundation of avoidance. Not avoidance of the things that actually harm you...that would be useful...but avoidance of the interior. Avoidance of the hard questions, the uncomfortable feelings, the honest accounting of who you are and how you are living. The product being sold, beneath the language of health and self-care and optimization, is most often a more comfortable relationship with the surface of life. Better sleep through better mattresses. Better nutrition through better supplements. Better productivity through better apps. Better feelings through better experiences purchased at a price point designed to make them feel like achievements.

None of this is entirely without value. Sleep matters. Nutrition matters. The small upgrades to daily life that make things more comfortable are not inherently bad. But they are being sold as wellness and wellness...genuine, durable, foundational wellness...is not what they are. What they are is the infrastructure of comfort. And comfort, however necessary it is as a baseline condition, is not the same thing as being well.

Being well, in the sense that this book means it, requires something that comfort specifically cannot provide: the willingness to look honestly at your interior life, to sit with what is uncomfortable there, to build practices that hold under pressure rather than practices that depend on pressure never

arriving. It requires, in the word we have used throughout this book, a practice...not a product.

Death row exposes the distinction with unusual clarity because it strips away the product entirely. There is no superior mattress in a death row cell. There is no meal prep delivery service, no meditation app, no gym membership, no weekend retreat. The only wellness available is the kind that can be built from the inside out, with the materials that remain after everything externally purchased has been removed. And the discovery...repeated across years, validated by the most extreme stress test imaginable...is that the kind of wellness you can build from the inside out is more durable and more genuine than anything available for purchase.

This is not an argument against products. It is an argument about what they are. They are tools, at their best...aids to a practice that would otherwise be harder. At their worst, they are substitutes for that practice...ways of feeling like you are attending to your wellness without actually doing the interior work that wellness requires. The distinction between tool and substitute is important and most people do not make it clearly enough.

Ask yourself, honestly: which of the things you currently do in the name of wellness are supporting a genuine interior practice and which are substituting for one? Which of the products you consume, the routines you maintain, the experiences you curate are helping you engage more honestly with your actual life and which are helping you engage with it less?

That inventory, taken honestly, is the beginning of the shift this chapter is about.

Rock Bottom as Foundation

There is a counterintuitive truth about the relationship between deprivation and development that runs through the entire experience at the center of this book: the worst circumstances produced the best version of the self.

Not despite the deprivation. Because of it.

This requires careful handling, because it is easy to hear it as a romanticization of suffering...as if the lesson is that everyone should experience deprivation in order to grow, or that the people most broken by difficult circumstances simply weren't broken in the right way. Neither of those is the point. Deprivation is not a good thing. Suffering is not valuable in itself. The lesson is more specific and more useful.

The lesson is that rock bottom...whatever form it takes in a specific life...is not primarily a place of loss. It is primarily a place of clarity. When everything that was concealing the essential self has been removed...the performances, the habits, the busyness, the comfortable distractions, the self-image maintained by external achievement...what remains is what is actually there. The real aptitudes. The real values. The real capacities that were present all along but were never visible through the layer of comfortable concealment.

On death row, this clarity was not optional. There was nothing to do with the time except discover who was actually in the cell. And what was discovered...the aptitude for building and engineering, the capacity for genuine connection maintained across enormous distance, the spiritual depth that had no occasion to develop in a busier life, the psychological resilience that turned out to be structural rather than

situational...none of it was put there by the cell. All of it was already there. The cell only removed what had been covering it.

Most people will not have a death row to force the removal. They will need to do it deliberately, through the practices this book describes: the cultivation of simplicity that removes what is unnecessary, the reflection that turns attention honestly inward, the connection that anchors the self in something outside its own concerns, the purpose that gives the whole enterprise a direction worth moving in. These practices, applied consistently over time, produce the same clarity that extreme circumstances produce suddenly. They just take longer and require more deliberate effort, because nothing external is forcing the removal.

The question worth sitting with at this point in the book is not whether your life has been hard enough to teach you what you need to know about yourself. It is whether you have been paying close enough attention to what the circumstances you have actually had, however comfortable, have been trying to show you. The essential self is not hiding in the extreme case. It is present in every case, waiting for the attention that will reveal it.

What have you been too comfortable to see about yourself? What would become visible if you turned down the noise and looked?

Discipline as the Practice of Becoming

One of the most consistent and counterintuitive findings in the psychology of wellbeing is that the people who report the highest levels of life satisfaction are not, as common sense might suggest, the people with the most freedom from demands. They are the people with the most genuine

engagement with demanding practices...with work they find meaningful, with relationships they invest in seriously, with physical and mental challenges they have committed to over time.

The casual version of the good life...the life with no obligations, no demands, no commitments that cost anything...turns out not to feel like the good life from the inside. It turns out to feel empty. The satisfaction that most people are looking for is not the satisfaction of relief from effort. It is the satisfaction of effort expended in service of something worth the effort.

Death row, which removes almost every freedom, does not remove the capacity for this kind of engaged effort. What it does, paradoxically, is make that capacity more visible...because in the absence of the entertainment, the distraction, the ambient activity that fills most people's days without particularly engaging them, the only alternative to drift is genuine engagement. The men who thrive, in whatever sense thriving is available to them, are the men who find genuine engagement: with the legal fight, with learning, with building, with the maintenance of relationships, with the serious development of whatever capacities the conditions allow.

The men who do not thrive are the ones who drift...who let the institutional rhythm be the only rhythm, who do not build any interior structure that gives the days meaning, who allow the Department of Punishment to set all the terms of their existence. Drift is available in a death row cell just as it is available in a comfortable suburban house. The outcome, in both cases, is the same: a life lived at the surface, without the depth that genuine engagement provides.

Discipline, in this context, is not the absence of freedom. It is the exercise of the most important freedom available: the freedom to choose, each day, to engage genuinely with the life you actually have rather than waiting for a better version of it to arrive. This freedom is available in every circumstance. Most people do not use it fully, because using it requires effort and effort is easy to defer when the day will pass regardless.

The death row version of this understanding is unambiguous: the day will pass regardless. The question is only whether it passes with your full participation or without it.

Presence as the Core Practice

Beneath all the specific practices in this book...the breathing, the movement, the letter-writing, the three minutes of quiet...there is a single underlying practice that they all express and develop: presence. The capacity to be genuinely here, in this day, with this body, in these relationships, in this life, rather than spending the available time somewhere else...in worry about the future, in rehearsal of the past, in the endlessly available alternative realities offered by screens and fantasies and the mental noise of unprocessed experience.

This is harder than it sounds and it has become harder in recent years as the tools for not being present have become more sophisticated, more available and more deliberately designed to capture and hold attention. The phone in the pocket is, among other things, a very powerful tool for not being where you are. Every notification is an invitation to leave the present moment for somewhere more stimulating, more novel, more carefully engineered to trigger the reward systems of a brain that was not designed to resist it.

Death row removes most of these tools. The result...when worked with rather than simply endured...is a forced presence that, over time, reveals something about the present moment that most people in the free world rarely discover: that the present moment, fully inhabited, is sufficient. That the life available in a six-by-nine cell, lived with full attention and genuine engagement, contains more of what actually constitutes a good life...meaningful work, genuine connection, interior peace, purposeful direction...than the life of a distracted person in a comfortable house who never quite arrives in the moment they are actually in.

This is not a comfortable finding. It suggests that the problem most people are trying to solve with all the products and optimizations and upgrades is not, at its root, a problem of circumstances. It is a problem of presence. And presence cannot be purchased. It can only be practiced.

The practices in this book are all, in one way or another, practices of presence. The breath practice brings you into your body. The movement practice brings you into physical reality. The cooking practice brings you into sensory attention. The quiet three minutes bring you into your own interior. The letter brings you into genuine contact with another person. The honest inventory brings you into honest contact with yourself.

All of it is in service of the same underlying aim: helping you be genuinely here, in the life you actually have, rather than somewhere else in the life you imagine or remember or scroll through on a small glowing screen.

The Practice: The Honest Wellness Inventory

Take stock, without judgment, of your current wellness practices.

For each thing you currently do in the name of wellness...each product, routine, subscription, or habit...ask a single question: Is this helping me engage more honestly and fully with my actual life, or is it helping me avoid that engagement more comfortably?

Be honest. Some things will be genuine tools. Others will be sophisticated avoidance.

For anything that falls into the avoidance category, ask what it is avoiding. That thing...whatever it is...is where the real work is.

Chapter 14: Rethinking Freedom

The Man in the Cell and the Man in the Meeting

Picture two people. One is in a cell on death row. His movements are severely restricted. He cannot leave when he wants to. He cannot eat what he wants. He cannot choose when the light comes on or off. His access to the outside world is mediated through a telephone and the occasional letter. By any conventional measure, he has almost no freedom.

The other person is in a meeting he did not want to attend, with a deadline he is already behind on, a text from his ex-spouse about the child custody arrangement, three hundred unread emails, a gym membership he has not used in six weeks, a self-improvement book on his nightstand that he has not opened in a month and a persistent background hum of anxiety that he cannot quite locate and has largely stopped trying to locate. He can leave the meeting when it ends. He can drive home in his own car. He can order whatever he wants for dinner. He is, by every conventional measure, free.

Which of these two people is actually freer?

The question is not rhetorical in the pejorative sense...it is not meant to suggest that the answer is obviously and dramatically in favor of the man in the cell, or to romanticize his situation. His situation is genuinely worse in the ways that matter most: the legal reality he faces, the physical confinement, the absence of his family and the texture of ordinary life, the uncertainty that shadows every day. Those losses are real and enormous.

But the question is genuinely worth sitting with. Because the man in the meeting...who has every external freedom available...is experiencing something that, from the inside, does not feel much like freedom. He is not free from the anxiety. Not free from the reactive daily scramble. Not free from the accumulating weight of commitments that are driving him rather than being driven by him. Not free from the sense that the life being lived is somehow not quite the life intended, without there being a clear point at which the divergence happened or a clear path back to the intended one.

The man in the cell, meanwhile, describes something that sounds more like freedom than anything the meeting room contains: a decompression time that is genuinely his, every day. An interior life that is genuinely private and genuinely cultivated. A relationship to his own thoughts and values that is clear and stable, not eroded by the daily friction of other people's demands on his attention. A sense that he knows who he is and what he is doing and why, even in circumstances that would seem to make all of that impossible.

What is going on?

Internal and External Freedom

The distinction between internal and external freedom is not new. Stoic philosophy made it central to its entire project. Viktor Frankl developed it from inside Nazi concentration camps. Contemplative traditions across cultures have understood for millennia that the freedom of the interior life is categorically different from the freedom of the external situation and that the former is, in the deepest sense, the more important one.

What death row adds to this understanding is not a new insight but a contemporary demonstration, as extreme and unambiguous as possible, of something that tends to remain theoretical in more comfortable circumstances.

External freedom...the freedom to move, to choose, to act without institutional restriction...is genuine and valuable. We are not arguing otherwise. The deprivation of external freedom is a genuine harm and the systems that produce that deprivation on unjust terms are genuine wrongs. None of that is in question.

But external freedom is also, by itself, insufficient for the kind of life most people would actually call free if they were being honest about what they mean. External freedom without internal freedom is the freedom of a leaf in the wind: you can go anywhere, but you are not going anywhere in particular and the direction is largely set by whatever current happens to be moving at the time. It is freedom in the trivial sense...unconstrained...without freedom in the meaningful sense...self-directed.

Internal freedom...the freedom to orient your own interior life, to live according to your own values rather than the values of whatever environment you happen to be in, to maintain a stable and genuine sense of self that is not easily eroded by circumstance...this is the kind of freedom that holds under pressure. It is the kind that the man in the cell has built, deliberately and painstakingly, across more than two decades. It is also, in its more quotidian forms, the kind that the man in the meeting has largely surrendered, not through any dramatic choice but through the slow accumulated drift of a life that

never paused long enough to ask whether the direction being taken was the one intended.

The people who are most externally free and least internally free are not hard to identify. They are everywhere. They have every resource available. They have the education, the income, the social access, the time...all of it, or enough of it. And they are driven by anxiety, by comparison, by the demands of an image they feel compelled to maintain, by the fear that stopping would reveal something about the interior life that they would not like to see. The external freedom is real. The internal freedom is largely absent.

The Off Switch

There is a specific and practical dimension of internal freedom that emerges from the contrast between life on death row and life in the free world and it is worth naming directly: the capacity to stop.

On death row, there is always a decompression time. Not because the institution provides it...the institution does not...but because it has been claimed and held as a non-negotiable dimension of the day. The legal work is demanding. The institutional life has its own friction and complexity. The maintenance of relationships across distance takes effort and time. But within and alongside all of that, there is always time that is genuinely private, genuinely quiet, genuinely belonging to the interior life rather than to any external demand.

Outside the walls, this is frequently described as the scarcest resource of all. People who have every other resource available describe their time as the one thing they cannot seem to protect. The days are consumed by the accumulation of

obligations, each individually reasonable, collectively exhausting. The off switch...the capacity to genuinely stop, to shift from output to input or from input to simple presence, to be unavailable for a period of time without the arrangement of that unavailability requiring more effort than the unavailability saves...is something many people report having lost.

When pressed, most people who say they have no time will, on honest examination, find that they have time that is simply not protected. It is not that the hours are not there. It is that the habit of filling every available hour...with productivity, with entertainment, with the low-level social maintenance that smartphones make continuous...has become so established that the unfilled hour feels wrong. Feels like a failure. Feels like something that should be accounted for.

The practices in this book are, among other things, practices of claiming the off switch. The sixty-second breath practice at the beginning of the day is a small refusal to let the phone set the morning's terms. The ten minutes of deliberate movement is a period in which the body's needs, not the schedule's, are primary. The three minutes of daily quiet are explicitly designed to be the one period in the day during which the interior is the only address.

None of these are large. None of them require significant rearrangement of the day. What they require is the decision that the interior life deserves some portion of the day that is genuinely protected...that you deserve the kind of time for yourself that you would grant without question to any external obligation.

Most people do not believe this fully enough to act on it. They believe it intellectually...yes, of course, self-care, everyone

needs some time for themselves. But in the actual allocation of the actual hours, the interior gets what is left after everything else has taken its share. Which is usually very little and sometimes nothing.

The man in the cell has less than almost anyone. He has more interior freedom than almost anyone. The relationship between those two facts is the whole argument.

Imprisoned by What You Cannot Put Down

The specific example offered from the cell is deliberately mundane: the person imprisoned by child support payments, by the debt that requires every working hour to service, by the obligations that do not pause and cannot be renegotiated. This is not meant as a judgment of any of those situations...most of them arrived through circumstances that were not simple choices and the people in them are managing what they have to manage.

The observation is structural: there are forms of external freedom that produce, in their lived experience, something that resembles confinement. Not because the freedom is not real but because the conditions of exercising it are so constrained by obligation, by debt, by the relentless pace of a life in which there is never quite enough of anything, that the freedom to go anywhere does not translate into the felt experience of going somewhere you actually chose.

There is also a more subtle form of this confinement that is worth naming: the confinement of comparison. People in the free world are subjected to a continuous and largely invisible comparison exercise...with the lives being presented on social media, with the careers and incomes and relationships of the people around them, with the idealized versions of their own

lives that advertising and culture have made it easy to imagine. This comparison is not a neutral source of information. It is a relentless generator of the experience of deficiency...of the sense that what you have and what you are is insufficient relative to some standard that keeps adjusting upward.

On death row, this particular form of confinement is largely absent. There is no social media. The comparison set is the people on the wing...people whose lives are in no way glamorized, who are not presenting curated versions of their best moments, who are managing the same institutional constraints as everyone else. In the absence of the comparison machine, the evaluation of one's own life can happen against a more honest standard: not am I doing as well as the person being presented on a screen, but am I doing what matters, in the way it should be done, with the resources I actually have.

This is, quietly, one of the most significant freedoms available on death row...and one of the most significant unfreedoms available on social media. The constant exposure to other people's curated presentations of their lives produces, for many people, a form of imprisonment that is all the more effective for being invisible. You are free to stop looking. But the habit is deep, the pull is engineered and most people find that the freedom to stop looking is much harder to exercise than it sounds.

The question for anyone reading this who wants to exercise more of the internal freedom this chapter is about: what are you unable to put down? Not in the sense of addiction...though that is real too...but in the sense of comparison, obligation, performance, the maintenance of an image that has more to do

with other people's perceptions than your own values. What are you carrying that was never yours to carry in the first place?

Putting it down is a form of freedom. It is available right now. Most people do not take it because they are not sure who they would be without it. Finding out is the beginning of the internal freedom this chapter is about.

The Practice: The Comparison Fast

For one full day...twenty-four hours...stay entirely off social media. Not because social media is inherently evil, but because one day without it will reveal something about how much cognitive and emotional space the comparison exercise has been occupying.

Notice what you reach for in the moments you would usually reach for your phone. Notice what the quiet that replaces the scroll contains. Notice whether the day feels longer or shorter, richer or emptier, with or without the feed.

Then, with whatever you notice, decide deliberately...not by default...how much of that space you want to give back.

Chapter 15: Practicing Death Row Wellness Outside

The Translation

Everything in this book has been in service of this final chapter. Not the theory. Not the inspiration. The translation...the conversion of everything observed in the extreme case into something genuinely applicable in the ordinary one.

We want to do that translation as concretely and as specifically as possible, because the gap between finding something interesting to read about and actually changing how you live is enormous and most books that bridge the first gap do very little about the second. Our commitment in these pages has been different. The practices at the end of each chapter are not decorative. This final chapter is not a summary. It is an attempt to hand you something you can actually use, in the specific terms of the life you are actually living.

Let us begin with what we know.

We know that a man has sustained genuine wellness...physical, psychological, relational and spiritual...for more than two decades in conditions specifically designed to prevent it. We know what practices constitute that wellness, because we have spent four sections examining them in detail. We know that those practices require no equipment, no particular income, no favorable circumstances and no ideal conditions. We know this because they have been practiced in conditions that are the farthest possible thing from favorable.

What they require is something else. Something that cannot be purchased and cannot be provided by any external resource: the decision to practice them. Not once. Daily. In the actual circumstances of the actual life. With whatever is available and without waiting for better conditions to arrive.

That decision is what this chapter is about.

The Three-Minute Invitation

The single most direct and transferable piece of practical guidance that emerged from two decades of life on death row is also the smallest: find three minutes that are genuinely yours.

Not five. Not twenty. Three. Three minutes in which your phone is down and your earbuds are out and no one else's voice or image or demand is present. Three minutes in which you tune in...not to music, not to a podcast, not to any form of content...but to your own interior. To the question of what today needs from you. To the question of what you need from today. To the simple act of being present in your own life for long enough to register that it is happening.

The prescription is specific because the precision matters: three minutes is small enough that no honest person can claim they do not have it. The person with the most overscheduled day imaginable has three minutes. The parent of young children has three minutes. The person working two jobs has three minutes. Three minutes is not a luxury. It is the minimum investment in your own interior life that can reasonably be called an investment at all.

What those three minutes are for is equally specific: they are not for planning. Not for problem-solving. Not for going over the to-do list one more time. They are for arriving. For the simple act of checking in with the self that exists underneath

all the doing...the self that has observations and inclinations and genuine needs that the constant pace of the day tends to override.

From that check-in, two questions are worth asking. What does today need from me? Not the calendar's answer, not the inbox's answer...your answer. What quality of presence, what specific effort, what kind of attention does today actually call for? And following from that: what is one thing I can do today...one concrete action...that moves in the direction of what matters most to me, however slightly?

Not five things. Not a plan. One thing. Done. Then the day can proceed with the knowledge that you have been in it, genuinely, for at least three minutes...and that the three minutes produced something that the rest of the day can be organized around.

This is a small practice. It is not a small result.

From Thinking to Doing

One of the most consistent observations about the psychology of people who are struggling with the gap between their intentions and their lives is that they spend far more time thinking about what they want to do than doing it. The thinking is comfortable. It resembles progress. It produces the emotional satisfaction of engagement without the actual friction and effort of action. And it can go on indefinitely, because thinking has no natural endpoint. You can always think more carefully, plan more thoroughly, prepare more completely before you begin.

The death row experience offers a sharp corrective to this pattern. In an environment where time is genuinely limited...where legal deadlines are real, where the window for

certain actions closes if it is not acted through...the bias toward action is not a personality trait. It is a survival strategy. You do not spend three months deciding whether to file the motion. You file the motion.

Most people outside these walls do not face legal deadlines of this urgency. But most people outside these walls have their own version of the motion that has not been filed: the conversation that has been rehearsed and not had, the project that has been planned and not begun, the relationship that has been meant to be repaired and has not been, the practice that has been intended to be started and has not been started.

The prescription that emerged from the extreme case is direct: spend less time thinking and more time doing. Not impulsively...preparation matters and acting without adequate thought produces its own problems. But the balance, for most people, is dramatically off in the direction of thinking. The three-minute practice is, in part, designed to correct this: to compress the planning and intention into a brief, contained period and then to move into doing.

Dreams are usually ahead of plans. Plans are usually ahead of action. Action is the only part of the sequence that changes anything. The three minutes are for aligning the dream and the plan enough that the action can begin. Then begin.

The Four Pillars in Practice

We have been using the language of the four pillars...simplicity, reflection, connection and purpose...since the Introduction. We want to close this chapter by making them as concrete and daily as possible, because they are not meant to be abstract values. They are meant to be the actual organizing principles of how you live each day.

Simplicity in daily practice means the regular, deliberate removal of what is not necessary. Not the dramatic clearing of everything...that tends to be unsustainable and often more about performance than genuine simplification. The daily version is smaller: before adding anything new to the day, asking whether it is genuinely necessary or genuinely desired and removing something of equal weight if the honest answer to both questions is no. The question that simplicity asks every day is not *how do I get more done* but *what can I let go of so that what remains can receive my full attention*.

For most people, applying this consistently for even a month will produce a perceptible change in the quality of daily experience. Not because the days become emptier but because what fills them begins to correspond more closely to what actually matters and less to what the environment defaulted to filling them with.

Reflection in daily practice means a regular, honest check-in with your own interior. The three-minute practice is the minimum version. The journal, for those to whom writing comes naturally, provides more. The long walk with no input...no podcast, no music...provides it for others. Prayer, meditation, intentional conversation with a trusted person: all of these can serve the function. What the function requires, in whatever form it takes, is regularity and honesty. Regularity because the self that is never examined drifts in ways that are not noticed until the drift has become significant. Honesty because the examination that confirms everything you already believe about yourself is not examination at all...it is just a more elaborate form of comfort.

The question that reflection asks every day: who am I being and is it who I intend to be? If the honest answer reveals a gap, the next question is what specific action would close it. Reflection without action is rumination. Reflection that produces a specific next step is navigation.

Connection in daily practice means the regular, active investment in the relationships that actually hold you. Not the passive maintenance of social proximity...being in the same house or the same office or the same social feed as people does not constitute connection in the sense that this book means. It means the deliberate, specific act of being genuinely present with another person: asking the question you actually want to ask, saying the thing you actually feel, expressing the appreciation or concern or curiosity that is actually there and tends not to get expressed because the day does not naturally create space for it.

One genuine connection per day is enough to maintain. Not a deep conversation with everyone in your life every day...that is neither possible nor necessary. One moment, chosen and genuine, in which you are actually with another person rather than adjacent to them. Over a year of days, 365 such moments build something that no social media following and no professional network can replace.

Purpose in daily practice means the daily contact with the reason you are doing any of this. Not the grand mission statement...though that can be useful as an anchor. The daily version is simpler: the single answer, revisited each morning, to the question of what today is for. What is the one thing that, if accomplished today, would make the day have been genuinely worthwhile? Not the most productive thing, not the

most urgent thing...the most meaningful thing. The thing that connects to something larger than the immediate task.

This question, asked daily, performs a specific function: it prevents the accumulation of days that are busy but directionless. It is possible to be extremely productive for months and years without moving in any direction that actually matters to you. The daily purpose question is a compass check...it reorients the day's effort toward what the day is actually for, before the day's momentum carries you somewhere you did not intend to go.

The Recipe

The man at the center of this book, when offered back the four pillars...simplicity, reflection, connection, purpose...as a description of what he had been practicing, confirmed them immediately. He had not organized his practices under those labels. He had simply done what worked, over many years, in conditions that punished anything that did not work. The labels were the outside observer's contribution. The practices were entirely his.

He offered a final image for what the four together produce: a recipe.

Each ingredient, taken alone, has some effect. Simplicity without reflection is just austerity. Reflection without connection becomes self-absorbed. Connection without purpose can be diffuse and draining. Purpose without simplicity can become a harried, exhausting drive toward an always-receding goal. It is the combination, the four working together, that produces what the extreme case demonstrated is possible: a life genuinely well lived in whatever circumstances that life actually occupies.

You do not need all four to be perfectly developed before beginning. You begin with whatever is most available and most pressing. If your mind is full of noise, begin with simplicity. If you have lost contact with your own interior, begin with reflection. If you are isolated, begin with connection. If you feel that your days have no direction that matters, begin with purpose. Begin where you are. The other three will follow, because they are not independent. They pull each other forward. Work on any one of them seriously enough and you will find that the others become easier.

This is, finally, the essence of what two decades in a death row cell have to teach: not that suffering is instructive, not that deprivation is ennobling, not that extreme circumstances produce wisdom automatically. But that the practices available to a human being who has almost nothing...the practices of the breath, the body, the attentive meal, the genuine connection, the honest reflection, the spiritual depth, the purposeful orientation...are the same practices available to a human being who has everything. The difference is only in what the circumstances force. When circumstances force nothing, the practices have to be chosen.

Choose them. Every day. In the circumstances you actually have.

The Practice: Your Three Minutes

Beginning tomorrow morning...not someday, tomorrow...before you look at your phone or speak to anyone or consume any content of any kind, sit for three minutes.

During those three minutes, ask yourself two questions. What does today need from me? What is one thing I can do today that moves in the direction of what matters most?

Write the answer to the second question somewhere you will see it.

Then do that thing. Before the end of the day.

Do this every morning for thirty days. At the end of thirty days, evaluate what has changed...not in your circumstances, but in your relationship to them.

That relationship is what this book has been about.

End of Part V

Conclusion: Bearing Witness

We want to begin the ending of this book with an honest acknowledgment of what we have asked of you.

We have asked you to spend time inside an experience that most people spend considerable energy not thinking about. Death row is not a comfortable subject. It is not something most people in comfortable circumstances want to bring into their daily reading, not because they are callous but because the reality of it...the specific, concrete, daily reality of a human being held in a small cell while the state determines how and when he will die...is genuinely difficult to hold alongside a normal day. It asks something of you. It asks you to look at something you would rather not look at, to feel something you would rather not feel, to sit with a level of injustice and suffering that the ordinary arrangements of comfortable life are specifically designed to keep at a distance.

We asked you to look anyway. We are grateful that you did.

But we want to be honest about something else too: looking is not enough. The discomfort of looking, however real, does not constitute bearing witness. Bearing witness is something more demanding...more active, more sustained and more costly than the passive receipt of difficult information. It is the subject of this conclusion and it is the final and most important thing this book has to say.

What Bearing Witness Requires

To bear witness to a life is to acknowledge, with genuine and sustained attention, that the life is real. That the person

living it is as fully human as you are. That what happens to them matters...not abstractly, not in principle, but actually, concretely, in a way that has implications for how you live your own life.

Most people, exposed to difficult information about difficult lives, manage the discomfort through a series of moves that produce the feeling of having engaged without requiring the reality of engagement. They feel bad. They express the feeling. They may even do something...sign something, share something, donate something. And then they return to the ordinary arrangements of their ordinary day, having discharged the obligation that the uncomfortable information created.

None of that is bearing witness. It is the management of discomfort in a way that allows the discomfort to pass without requiring genuine change.

Genuine bearing witness is different. It is the sustained acknowledgment that the life you have witnessed...and through it, the lives of the many others whose circumstances it represents...has placed a claim on you. Not a claim you can fully discharge through a single action or a single donation or a single difficult conversation. A claim that changes something in how you see the world and how you move through it from this point forward.

We are not saying that reading this book obligates you to become an activist for criminal justice reform, though we would not object if it moved you in that direction. We are saying something more specific and more personal: that genuine engagement with the life at the center of this book...with what it has taken to remain whole in conditions

designed to produce the opposite of wholeness...should change the way you regard the life you are actually living.

Because that is the other side of the bearing witness. You cannot genuinely witness what has been required to stay well in a death row cell without coming away with a recalibrated sense of what your own circumstances allow. Without feeling, in the most practical and non-sentimental sense, the weight of the difference between the life being lived in that cell and the life available to you. Without understanding, with a clarity that abstract knowledge of privilege rarely produces, that the freedoms and resources you move through daily are not the floor of human experience. They are extraordinary. And they are going, in many cases, largely unused.

That is the bearing witness this book asks of you. Not guilt...guilt is useless here and we have no interest in producing it. But the specific, grounded, practically consequential recognition that the life available to you is more generous than you have been treating it and that the practices required to live it fully are less demanding than you have been pretending.

The Tension Between Hope and Reality

We owe you an honest accounting of a tension that runs through this entire book and that we have not fully addressed until now.

The book is, in one sense, a story of hope. It is the story of a man who built an extraordinary interior life in conditions of extreme deprivation, who maintained his humanity in a place designed to eliminate it, who arrived at a form of genuine wellness that most people living in full freedom never reach. That is a hopeful story. It is genuinely hopeful and we have told it as such.

But we have not told you everything. We have not told you the full weight of the legal situation...the years of filings and hearings and decisions and reversals, each one carrying the compressed hope of a man who knows that his life turns on the willingness of the system to see what it has done. We have not told you about the other men on the row whose stories are less sustaining, whose grip on their own humanity has slipped in ways that are not fully recoverable, whose lives are evidence of what this environment can do to a person who did not have the particular combination of character and circumstance and sheer tenacity that kept Paul whole.

We have not told you about the executions. About the specific experience of being present, in a limited and mediated way, when a man you have known for years is taken and killed by the state. About what that does to everyone who remains. About the particular silence on the row after an execution...the quality of that silence, which is different from any other silence, because it is the silence of people who know exactly what it means and have no framework provided to them for holding it.

We have not told you about the days...and there are days...when the practices in this book feel insufficient. When the weight of the situation exceeds what any interior practice can fully address. When the question of why any of this is worth continuing to build, given the uncertainty of whether there will be an outside to build toward, does not have an easy answer. When hope requires effort...not the hardwired, automatic orientation that we described in Chapter 12, but genuine, costly, difficult effort to maintain in the face of circumstances that are doing everything they can to make it impossible.

We tell you this now not to undermine what came before. The practices are real. The wellness is real. The extraordinary interior life built in that cell is real and it is available, in its essential form, to anyone who is willing to do the work. None of that is diminished by the acknowledgment that the work is genuinely hard.

We tell you because bearing witness requires honesty. And the honest version of this story includes the weight alongside the hope, the difficulty alongside the achievement, the ongoing uncertainty alongside the hard-won peace. A story that includes only the hope does a disservice to the reality and it does a disservice to you...because it asks you to be inspired by a sanitized version of something that, in its actual form, has been far more demanding than inspiration captures.

The man at the center of this book has not had an inspiring life in the comfortable sense of that word. He has had a hard life, with some genuine beauty in it and he has responded to the hardness with a quality of presence and intention that we believe deserves to be witnessed...not with admiration from a safe distance, but with the kind of engaged, honest, sustained attention that actually registers what it cost and what it produced.

That is what we are asking for when we ask you to bear witness.

To See

The first dimension of bearing witness is sight...the willingness to actually look at what is in front of you without the filters that comfortable distance provides.

Most people in comfortable circumstances do not see the full reality of what lives like this one contain...not because the

information is unavailable, but because the seeing is uncomfortable and the not-seeing is easy. The arrangements of daily life in a developed country are extraordinarily effective at maintaining a comfortable opacity between the people who have most of the resources and the people who have almost none. The prison is somewhere else. The death row cell is somewhere else. The specific human being living inside it is a category, a statistic, a story that belongs to someone else's news feed rather than to the personal, accountable territory of your own moral attention.

This book has tried to break that opacity. To make one specific life specific...to give it the texture of daily experience, the particular details that distinguish a human being from a category. The blindfold against the thirty-minute interruption. The plastic bag in the hot-water sink. The paper-mâché hummingbird whose beak was clipped and placed in the flowers at a mother's graveside. The documentary about Peter Green watched in a cell a decade after a teacher's cryptic words finally decoded themselves.

These details are not ornamental. They are the substance of bearing witness. They are the specific, irreducible particulars that make it impossible to maintain the comfortable abstraction of *a man on death row* and replace it, necessarily, with *this man, in this cell, with this history, building this particular life with these particular materials against these particular odds*.

Once you have seen that...once the abstraction has been replaced by the specific...something changes. Not dramatically, not immediately, but actually. The category becomes a person.

The person has a claim on you that the category did not. You cannot unsee it.

We are asking you to look at the other places in your life where you have maintained comfortable abstraction against the specific. The people in your own community whose lives are constrained by circumstances you benefit from not examining closely. The systems you participate in whose costs are paid by people who do not have your resources. The specific human beings...not categories, not statistics...whose lives intersect with yours in ways that you have managed not to fully see.

See them. This is the first ask.

To Care

Seeing, by itself, produces the response it tends to produce in people with good hearts: the feeling of caring. The sympathy, the wish that things were different, the genuine emotional response to genuinely difficult reality.

We do not want to diminish that response. Feeling is real and the capacity for genuine sympathy...for being actually moved by another person's reality...is one of the better features of human nature and should not be dismissed.

But feeling is not caring in the active sense. Caring, in the active sense, is what you do with the feeling. It is the translation of genuine sympathy into sustained engagement. And the gap between the feeling and the engagement is where most of the moral energy of most good-hearted people drains away...into the vague intention to do something, the occasional gesture that discharges the acute discomfort without constituting genuine change, the return to normal life with the feeling intact but the engagement largely absent.

The caring this book invites you toward is more specific than that. It has several dimensions.

The first is personal: caring for the people already in your life with the quality of attention and presence and expressed regard that this book has been describing. The practices in Part VI are not abstract virtues. They are specific forms of caring...for your own body, your own mind, your own spirit and for the people whose lives intersect with yours. Doing them consistently is the most concrete form of caring available to you and it is available today, in the circumstances you actually have.

The second is relational: caring specifically for people who are isolated, constrained, or living in circumstances that have made it harder for others to see them fully. You know who these people are. They are in your neighborhood, your workplace, your family, your community. Some of them are isolated by poverty. Some by illness. Some by incarceration or the aftermath of it. Some simply by the kind of quiet social invisibility that comes from being different in ways that the mainstream does not know how to accommodate. Caring for them does not require grand gestures. It requires the simple, regular, specific acts of acknowledgment that say: I see you. You are real to me. You exist in my moral attention.

The third is structural: caring, at whatever level your circumstances allow, about the systems that produce the conditions this book has described. This is the dimension that most people find most overwhelming, because it points toward the largest and most intractable problems...the criminal justice system, the conditions of incarceration, the specific horror of death row as an institution. We are not going to tell you what

to do about those systems, because the honest answer is that what any individual person can do about them is limited and pretending otherwise would be dishonest.

What we will say is this: the fact that the system is large and your ability to change it is limited does not exempt you from caring about it. Caring about it means, at minimum, not accepting it without examination. Not treating the existence of death row, of the conditions we have described, of the specific form of harm that is done to specific human beings inside it, as simply a feature of the world that has nothing to do with you. It is a feature of the world and it is in some ways produced by the world you participate in. That participation comes with some responsibility. What you do with that responsibility is yours to determine.

To Act

The final dimension of bearing witness is action...the translation of sight and care into something that actually changes how you live.

We have given you twenty-four practices in Part VI. We have given you the four pillars. We have given you the framework of simplicity, reflection, connection and purpose, developed across five full sections and grounded in the most extreme proof of concept available. We have done everything we can think of to make the translation from insight to action as simple and accessible as possible.

What we cannot do is make the decision for you.

The decision...to begin, to sustain, to return after failing, to treat the interior life as genuinely worth the investment of thirty minutes per day...is yours. It was always yours. Every tool in this book is inert until the decision activates it. And the

decision, as this book has tried to demonstrate across every chapter, is not made once. It is made daily. In the specific, small, unglamorous moments when it would be easier not to make it.

The man at the center of this book has made it every day for more than two decades. Not because the circumstances have encouraged it...they have done everything possible to discourage it. Because he understood, early and clearly and by necessity, that the decision was the only thing that could not be taken from him. The cell could be made smaller. The food could be made worse. The legal situation could be made harder. The isolation could be deepened. Everything external was subject to the institution's authority.

The decision to remain a person who builds rather than drifts, who connects rather than withdraws, who maintains the practices of genuine wellness rather than surrendering to the entropy that the environment was working to produce...that decision was his alone. It could not be mandated or manufactured or taken away. It was, in the deepest and most literal sense, the last freedom available.

You have that freedom too. You have it in conditions that are incomparably less extreme. You have it with resources, with time, with access to your own body and your own relationships and your own spiritual life in ways that he is largely denied. You have, in other words, everything he has and more.

Use it.

The Life That Continues

There is something important that we need to name before this book ends, because it is the part of the story that books like this one tend to obscure.

The story does not end here.

Most books about people in extreme circumstances conclude at a moment of resolution...the release, the exoneration, the hard-won arrival at something that can function as a satisfying ending. We do not have that moment to offer you, because it has not happened yet. The legal situation continues. The cell is still occupied. The outcome is still uncertain. Every day that passes while this book is read and discussed and perhaps helpful to some of its readers is a day in which the man who made it possible is still inside, still doing the work, still building the life that this book has tried to honor.

That reality has an implication that we want to state clearly: the bearing of witness that this conclusion has been asking for is not retroactive. It is not a response to a completed story. It is engagement with an ongoing one.

The man in this book does not need your admiration. He does not need your inspiration, extracted cleanly from the difficulty of his situation and carried home to improve your morning routine. He needs...as every person living in conditions of this kind needs...to exist in the genuine moral attention of people who see him fully, who hold his situation as a real and ongoing thing rather than a story they read once and moved on from and who carry that attention into whatever forms of care and action their own circumstances allow.

This is what we mean by bearing witness. Not the one-time reception of a difficult story. The sustained, active, ongoing acknowledgment that the life continues, that the person in it remains fully real and fully human and that what happens to him continues to matter.

We do not know what the outcome of his legal situation will be. We do not know whether the next filing will produce the development that all the filings before it have been building toward. We do not know whether there will be a moment, someday, when the door opens not for the last institutional purpose but for the first genuine departure...when Paul walks out with the additional damage and the extraordinary wisdom that this place has produced in him.

We hope for it. We work toward it in whatever ways are available to us. And we ask you to hold the hope alongside us...not as an abstraction, not as a comfortable narrative about the triumph of the human spirit, but as the specific, grounded, actively maintained hope for a specific person whose specific life has been the subject of every page you have read.

What This Book Has Demonstrated

Let us close with the simplest possible restatement of what this book has tried to prove.

A human being, given almost nothing, can build a life of genuine wellness. Not comfort...wellness. Not the absence of suffering...the presence of meaning, connection, discipline, depth and spiritual integrity, built and maintained across years and decades in conditions designed to make all of that impossible.

That fact is, on its face, extraordinary. We have offered it to you not as inspiration...though it may inspire...but as evidence. Evidence that what genuine wellness requires is not favorable circumstances but genuine practice. Evidence that the four pillars...simplicity, reflection, connection, purpose...are not luxuries available to people whose lives are going well. They are

the structure of a life going well, available to anyone who is willing to build them, in any circumstances.

You are living in circumstances that are, almost certainly, more favorable than the ones in which those pillars were built and demonstrated. You have access to your own body, to your own relationships, to your own spirit, in ways that are not fully available in a death row cell. You have the time...more of it than you are currently using well. You have the space...more of it than you need.

What you have that the man in the cell does not have is the absence of compulsion. He built his wellness because the alternative was dissolution...because the environment left no middle ground between building something and losing everything. You have the middle ground. You have the comfortable space in which drift is possible, in which nothing forces the issue, in which the day can pass without any particular quality of presence or intention and the consequences are not immediate.

That middle ground is the gift and the trap of the comfortable life. The gift is that you are not forced. The trap is that you are not forced. The practices in this book require something that no circumstance will eventually compel from you: the self-generated decision to live as if the life you have been given is worth the full engagement of everything you have.

It is worth that. Yours is. His is. Every life that passes through this world, whether in a comfortable house or a six-by-nine cell, is worth the full engagement of the person living it.

Be fully in yours.

That is what this book has asked from the first page. It is what we are asking again, for the last time, from this one.

A Final Word

We are grateful to Paul for everything that made this book possible: his candor, his time, his willingness to examine his own experience with the honesty that has characterized everything described in these pages and his commitment to offering that experience in service of people he will never meet.

We have tried to honor that trust by telling the truth...not the comfortable truth, not the inspiring truth that leaves out the difficult parts, but the full truth, as clearly as we could see it and as honestly as we could render it. Whether we have succeeded is for you to judge.

What we know is this: the life at the center of this book is extraordinary. It is extraordinary not because of what was done to it...the extremity of the circumstances, the injustice of the situation, the decades of confinement. It is extraordinary because of what was done with it. Because of the decision, made daily for more than twenty years, to remain a person who builds rather than drifts. To remain in genuine contact with the people who matter. To keep the body capable and the mind sharp and the spirit pointed at something worth pointing at. To extract, from conditions that offered almost nothing, a life of genuine and demonstrable depth.

That is what we have been witnesses to. It is what we have tried, in these pages, to make you witnesses to as well.

Carry it forward. Not as a story you read once. As evidence you hold and act on and return to when the practices feel hard and the reasons for them feel distant.

The evidence is real. The practices work. The life is possible.

Begin.

End of Conclusion

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