



What visits mean to me

By Daniel McDonald, 36 years old, 11 years in prison in Texas

Visits, for me are metaphorical and literal bridges between prison and “the real world.” Because prison is undeniably atypical. Staying “connected” is therefore a challenge, but that is where the value in visits come in.

Granted, I have a radio, books, magazines, and a window to engage my senses, to ostensibly keep me connected with “the real world”--your world--but the reality of how I am separated makes it all seem like a dream. A fantasy. Sure, I can live vicariously through others, but it is really hard to maintain the feeling of being a part of what exists beyond these walls.

Now, don’t get me wrong, letters (metaphorical visits) are wonderful. There is an art in writing, perhaps a dying one. So when a person invests time and resources in me, I’m humbled. It takes a special individual to extend that kind of effort--I do not take it for granted.

It is just that, for me, (literal) visits add another element of realism. All at once I go from “out of sight, out of mind” to “in the moment.” The physical presence of friends or loved ones allows me to: experience and enjoy all the nuances of emotion. To see them move, smile, and laugh. That is real. Coupled with how often they keep me engaged in their lives, visits end up being a vital piece of the puzzle, making me feel loved and accepted.

And frequent visits help me to remain “in the moment”, where I feel as though I truly have a purpose or role in how events transpire beyond these walls. That makes me feel more real - more relevant.

The effect is so powerful that I’ve shed tears when a person tells me for the first time that they’ll be coming to visit. Transitioning from exclusive letter-writing to visits is a significant commitment. In the past I’ve asked myself: “What did I do to deserve this?” Bad choices put me in here. All of this could’ve been avoided. So, looking beyond those mistakes to come and see me, to essentially “wrap me in their arms”, is the most powerful form of compassion I’ve ever experienced. As I think about that “gift” - because that is what it is - I can close my eyes and let the new awareness of loving kindness wash over me, letting my mind, body, and spirit relax.

Such moments allow me to move beyond the degrees of separation I endure in here. Prison is an atypical environment filled with atypical people. We are all prisoners, but we are not all the same. Even guards leave something to be desired. As a result, my life is a lonely one because I usually cannot relate to others in here - meaning I do not agree with their ideals and actions. I see criminal activities as an avenue to perpetual suffering, so I strive to distance myself from them. Even so, there are certain “codes” in here, certain realities that no one can escape.

Many in here have nothing else but those “social contracts”. Visits, letters, and support from friends or family are lacking in their lives. That stands as a constant reminder of just how blessed I am. But I’m also forced to navigate the wayward activities that are all too common in prison.

That is the true saving grace of visits. When guards come to my door and tell me, “You have a visit,” I liken it to pausing a movie. In this case, a poor parody of “Groundhog Day.”

A transformation begins, but not because I will become a different person. It is just that the process of freshening up and dressing in clean clothes begins the process of lowering my defenses.

So I'll walk, meditate, and relax. Once at visitation I can simply enjoy being near people I like and love. But time flies. The beginning of each visit quickly becomes the end. That requires me to return to my silence, and the rare confidant whom I can share with.

Sorrow creeps in, as well. Sometimes I cry for the loss, but echoes of each visit carry me forward. Until the next visit I'll focus on being better.

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