



When that door slams, all you ever were begins to die

By Mark Gerald, 48 years old, 26 years on death row in Florida

What you would have to learn first about being caged really depends on who you are. The absolutely unchangeable fact for every one of us though is that everything changes, when that door slams, all you ever were, all you loved, all you wished for, all the good memories, everything you lived for begins to die.

At first you will try in desperation to save it all, and for about the first year you will remain convinced that you can save it. But, before your very eyes you will see (and feel) the death sentence, the misery of others, the despair that they built this prison out of and gloom that holds it together relentlessly encroaching on every aspect of your life. Every day it takes something away, a loved one, a memory, a reason to smile, every day you surrender some part of your heart, of your mind, of your soul. You don't want to surrender it, often you fight it, but whether it is taken from you in some full-on assault on the sense or surreptitiously, you lose pieces of yourself every day.

So, pretty damn quick, in that first year or two, you have to decide whether or not you can redefine your whole life, decide what can be saved, decide what must be left behind. Can you adapt enough so as not to be crushed by the weight, but not so much that you become only a prisoner? They tell you every day, by words, by rules and regulations, by the symmetry of cement blocks and iron bars, by the calculus of disdain and contempt that you are worthless, you are disposable. Can you listen to that mantra ever hour of every day for ten years and never begin to believe they are right? For twenty years, or thirty?

Who are you? Are you someone, who, having all hope stripped away, will find new things to hope for? If so, you can survive this, if not you are dead no matter how long it takes them to kill you.

Are you someone who can hear a thousand voices testifying for hate, and one voice bearing witness to love, and listen only to the one voice? If so, you can survive here, if not.... well there is really no point in living if you can't hear that voice.

Anyway, I guess I have kept going for a variety of ever-evolving reasons but all of my reasons have been built on the same foundation. For me, there is one absolute, inalienable truth, no matter what this life brings, no matter what I must bear or endure for however long I believe there is more life, another life, afterlife, whatever label we put on it. For me it all culminates in love that is where everything brings us, to love. For me, in the end (which surely will reveal itself as another beginning) love will have done more than survived, it will have done more than endured, love will have

prevailed over everything contrary to it - hate, misery, despair, loss, sickness, even death, over all these love will prevail.

I am so convinced of this that I will bear whatever must be endured as best as I can, I will wait until there is no longer such a thing as time, for as long as I have some conscious existence I will believe this and I will look forward to it. If the past has taught me anything then I understand it is easier to believe on some days than others....