

Prisons

Two completely different responses to my post of July 11 about prisons - one from Charles about his brother who has just begun a seven year prison sentence here in the U.S. for a minor drug offense, and the other from Manooh about ten animal rights activists who are being kept in prison in Austria, without due process, under horrific conditions that one does not associate with the word "democracy".

I have personal connections in both directions. I know Charles quite well, and I understand that his brother has been having a troubled time of things for a number of years now.

Of the ten detained people that Manooh mentions, I personally know Martin Balluch - the one who is going on a hunger strike. I share her worry about his health, in addition to everything else. Martin is a very gentle and thoughtful and caring man, and he is *extremely* opposed to violence of any sort. The attempt by the Austrian government to paint him as some sort of mafioso is absurd. But then so much in the world is absurd these days.

My dad is in a different sort of prison, and this has been occupying much of our family's focus for the last several years. He suffers from atypical Parkinson's disease. The essential effect is that he is becoming progressively more locked in - losing his ability to walk, finding it difficult to speak, unable to move around in the world and make himself understood. What makes this especially awful is that my dad was always a very active man - he grew up on a farm, and all his life he has had the kind of physical robustness and energy that comes from that kind of upbringing.

And he is brilliant - still just as brilliant as ever, in spite of everything. These days he is writing several books simultaneously (not easy when you can hardly speak or move), and they are all quite wonderful. Of course the books provide a way for him to cope with the insidious helplessness of his condition. The writing is not exactly a door leading out of his prison, but a way to knock some windows through its walls, with lovely and panoramic views.

So many kinds of prison, and each with its own shape. Charles' brother may be locked within several different kinds of prison, if I understand the situation correctly, only one of which is made of steel and brick. Not all prisons are physical.

Martin is suffering greatly, but in an odd way he is also free, the way the Reverend King or Mahatma Gandhi were always free, in spite of all attempts to make them less so. He brings a powerful moral conviction with him, which I am confident will outlast these temporary prison walls.

And that makes him something like my dad, I guess, who each day summons the tremendous will power it must require to continue writing his books and connecting with people, in spite of the terrible misfortune that fate has thrown his way. I doubt I could ever live up to his example, but I am very grateful to have such a man as my father.