



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

A Second Coming Out

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July 26, 2015

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When I was growing up in the Sixties, movies were a major part of my life and the focus of many family evenings. Movies for us were not just entertainment but exposure to the realities of the greater world. I remember seeing *The Diary of Anne Frank* with my parents and learning the horrors of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. Not long after, I saw the Best Picture of 1947, *Gentlemen's Agreement*, and realized that anti-Semitism was not just limited to Nazi Germany but an ugly fact of American life. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Patch of Blue*, *No Way Out*, and *Pinky*, among many others, brought home the inherent injustice of racism in America. These movies stirred me to imagine how I could help bring our world to a better place in any small way.

As I've grown older, movies have had less meaning for me, but ten years ago I went to see the brilliant film *Capote*, about writer Truman Capote and his book *In Cold Blood*. There's a scene in which Capote meets Perry Smith, one of the two demented men who have murdered, in cold blood, a Midwestern family. Mirroring reality, there was a suggestion in the nuanced performance that Perry Smith was gay. In sensing Smith's loneliness and isolation, I couldn't help but feel an intense compassion for him.

For days, I couldn't stop imagining all the gay men in prison, isolated, alone, with no one on the other side to confide in. I tried to imagine a way I could better this situation, and decided to reach out to a gay man in prison and try to make his life a little better.

I am sure this response strikes some fear in you, or the impulse to mount an intervention. Throughout my life I've found volunteerism is the one way I can address a perceived injustice—whether as a Braille Institute reader for the blind, a member of an LGBT speakers bureau, or a companion and worker at an AIDS hospice. I've found the ability to listen, converse and laugh are the most healing for those contending with isolation, loneliness and impending death. These abilities I could also bring to one gay man in prison.

A quick Google search provided several websites of gay men in prison seeking a pen pal. I was not at all prepared for what I saw. The head shots were disturbing—the crimes frightening—and the spelling...*horrendous*. How could I connect with any of these men?

I was ready to give up when these words leapt out at me: "I feel so alone in here." The paragraph in which the man described himself had no spelling errors! He liked sports, motorcycles, reading, Country-Western and rock music and the hills of Sonoma where he had spent most of his life. A warm face smiled at me and the crime, burglary, was mild compared to what I had read. I wrote my first letter to John in February 2006 and we have been in communication ever since. On October 5th, he will be released after serving 14 years of a 17-year second-strike sentence...and I will be there to pick him up.

Eight years younger than I, John had grown up in a comfortable middle class family like mine in Northern California. His birth father left his mother while John was in his mother's womb,

and when John was born into his Irish American family two weeks after John F. Kennedy's assassination, he was named for that first Irish American president.

John was a talented athlete growing up but he was short and got picked on a lot. His older brother whom he adored told John to find a way to take care of himself. John became a Golden Gloves boxer as a pre-teen and racked up an impressive record of wins. He jumped to his present height of 6'1" in his junior year of high school and in senior year, both a top athlete and a good student, he won a baseball scholarship to Arizona State University.

But John quickly decided college wasn't for him and returned to Northern California and a series of lucrative blue collar jobs. By the time he reckoned he was more interested in men than women, he was pursued by a woman who insisted they were going to get married. A year later she proved right and John and his wife had three beautiful boys in quick succession.

John was a fun-loving, wild man whose gusto for life played out in lots of daredevil things. One of those things, unfortunately, was drugs. John and his wife became heavily involved with drugs and could not get out. John lost his job, his home and their vehicles, and he began to steal to support the family. This led to his first strike conviction for burglary and two years in a Northern California prison.

A friend of mine hearing this story asked, "How could anyone *steal*?" Another friend said to me, "Clyde, that could be any one of us." That friend is in recovery and I have found my friends who understand addiction first-hand are the most compassionate about John's history.

After John's release, his wife's parents compelled her to divorce him and move with their sons to the East Coast. John did his best to stay clean and regain a professional footing. But when he learned his ex-wife had died from a drug overdose, he was haunted by grief and guilt and started using again. The downward cycle resumed and John was arrested for a second strike at age 38.

Unfortunately John's trial came at a time when the Three Strikes law was rampantly championed as the cure for California's crime rate. The public prosecutor wanted to give John a life sentence for a second strike; prior to Three Strikes, it would have been a five-year sentence. The public defender was able to negotiate for a 17-year sentence, with parole at 14 years. John went cold turkey in jail and has not used drugs since he started serving his sentence, though they are readily available.

It took me a long time to learn John's full story because he was worried he would never hear from me again once I knew the truth. He didn't know that I was exposed to the alcohol addiction of multiple family members as a child, lived and worked in Hollywood and have seen just about everything relevant to the topic. I understand John and I have no judgment, even as someone who has had a gun held to his head in a robbery, chased away two burglars from the family home in the middle of the night as a teenager, and have been the victim of so

many thefts that I had a courtroom laughing at my account while being interviewed as a potential juror.

By the summer of 2006 John and I had become close enough that I visited him in Folsom Prison four times. If you arrive between 6:30 and 7:30 a.m., you might get to visit by 1 or 2 p.m. as they only process a handful of visitors at a time. Meanwhile you wait in a sterile building like a bus terminal, and if you are me, you study the people there representing all ethnicities and incomes: elders with walkers and wheelchairs, children with toys and excited giggles, preoccupied girlfriends, wives, and parents, each with the same look of expectation mixed with resignation.

Once you are driven by tram into the prison compound, you enter what looks like a medieval castle and are electronically and body searched. You can't bring anything except your i.d. and quarters in plastic sandwich bags for the vending machines to treat your friend and yourself to lunch. When finally admitted to the visiting area, you find an expanse of picnic tables under a patio roof, as in high school, and it might be another hour before your friend, husband, son, father or brother finally emerges, and you visit in plain view of guard towers and twenty foot storm fences with razor wire. These were the only times that John and I communicated without someone either listening in or reading what we had to say.

What I didn't see as we ate lunch was that he shared a cell designed for one man with another prisoner and showered every day with 75 other men. He hid and continues to hide his sexual identity in order to avoid the physical abuse of gays he has seen first-hand. All the prisoners upon entry have no choice but to secretly join a gang determined by geographic region in order to survive; John became part of the Santa Rosa gang. You look out for your gang members and they look out for you, especially when, as with the Santa Rosa gang, the Sacramento gang has it in for you. Two weeks after John voluntarily left Folsom for a privately run prison in Arizona, two members of his gang had their throats cut by members of the Sacramento gang; John got out just in time. Despite these circumstances, I was unable to convince the State of California through legal channels that John experienced a cruel and unusual punishment and his sentence should be reduced.

Because of his good behavior and work ethic, John is now in much better circumstances—a low-security fire-fighting prison in Northern California. There are only 95 men in the prison and John makes money in 24-hour shifts fighting forest fires around the state.

Last October, when John realized he had only a year until his second coming out, he wrote to me: "I'm scared." As noted in the earlier reading, when John entered prison in 2001, there were few options for men leaving a California prison and he was not optimistic about his opportunities upon release. This has changed thanks to nonprofits and state agencies taking conscientious steps to reduce high recidivism rates. Today, John has housing options, real job opportunities and a true chance to start over when he is released. Additionally, in recent weeks, President Barack Obama has called attention to the unfair sentencing of thousands of prisoners across the U.S., commuting the sentences of 89 prisoners for non-violent drug

offenses—with a goal of 1,000 sentence reductions. There are also several bi-partisan bills in Congress to redress unfair sentencing that stand to pass with support of both sides of the aisle. It's an amazing time!

But prisoners still need emotional and moral support from the outside. John's two older boys have remained in fitful but affectionate contact while John and his brother have very strained relations. Sadly, his mother died while he was in prison, but he recently learned that she left him a substantial legacy to restart his life which has given him real hope. When John wrote to me that he was scared, I wrote back, "More than anything, I want you to succeed, and I'm here to help you." He wrote to me, "You are my rock."

Will John survive his transition? Will he stay clean and out of trouble? I dearly hope so. Will I stick by him if he doesn't succeed?

John has me as a lifelong friend. It might seem on the surface that we have little in common, but John could have been any of the close friends I had in grade school, high school or college who always got me to step outside my comfort zone. We have both been described as "big kids," are inherently optimistic and make each other laugh, and hard work and deep relationships matter intensely to us both. We've even managed to resolve the fact—and this could be the hardest part—that he is a lifelong Giants fan and I am true to Dodger blue. (Poor me!) It's deeply ironic that while I originally wanted to make someone else's life better, John has done as much for me as I have for him. In his joyful, hilarious letters and our visits and countless phone calls he's helped me through life's tough patches over nine years. I also know with the propensity for addiction in my family, it could be me in John's standard issue shoes—"Clyde, that could be any one of us."

Not only will this be John's second coming out of prison. For me, telling my friends about John has been like a second coming out. I have experienced much more hostility in telling people that I have a friend in prison than I have when I've told them I am gay. I have gratefully accepted words of caution and concern, but I refuse to accept words of cruelty, and a few friendships have ended from such unkindness. Knowing that John will be out soon and he has already accepted my invitation to visit at Christmas, I have started telling people about him once again. One of them was my dear friend Grady Goddard. When I asked if she felt people at our church would be welcoming to John, she immediately cited the Seven Principles, primarily "the inherent dignity and worth of every person." I rejoice in the fact that I belong to a church and denomination with people like Grady who assert that no one is beneath compassion or acceptance.

But even if no one supported me, I have learned that it is so important to act on behalf of someone's welfare, especially if that person is at life's margins—and even if it draws hostility. As a UU committed to social justice, I can do no less, and I have many of you to thank for modeling this independent and active form of spiritual practice.

There's no question that there are men and women whose violent and destructive actions demand a separation from the world. But as exemplified in John's life, our legal and penal systems are heavily flawed and do not always respond humanely. Whatever their crimes, all prisoners deserve humane treatment, and re-entry can only be successful when those of us outside are supportive and compassionate. We must never lose sight of the humanity of our incarcerated brothers and sisters. The words from an influential film that I set to music for you this morning persist in my mind: I will always believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart— whoever they are, wherever they are on their spiritual journey— and whatever they have done.

May it be so! Amen.