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WordsUncaged Submission

(Essay)

“Pit of Hell: the Death Penalty”

It was 39 years ago that I killed a man in an arm robbery. In 1979, I was sentenced to death on my birthday—October 5—and a month later the Grey Goose pulled up to Old Folsom. I took one look at the prison and a cold chill ran down my spine. The prison walls and gate looked like something out of a Humphrey Bogart movie. But this was the real deal, and being a first timer, I wasn't given a pamphlet on how to do a prison term.

You see, I was sentenced to the quieter, less troublesome death penalty. I was sentenced to Life Without the Possibility of Parole (LWOP). Though, at the time, it didn't seem to bother me. I wasn't on Death Row, I wasn't on any execution list, waiting to be strapped down, and pumped full of drugs, waiting for the slow drip to begin until my breathing ended.

When I got to Old Folsom I couldn't wait to take off on someone. In fact, a brother I used to bully in school was given a twenty-dollar bill for four cartons of Camel cigarettes; he came back with only three. I told him by the time I got off Fish Row he better have my other carton. The next day those ten packs showed up.

As time started to slip away, I realized there was more to this than the physical acts of imprisonment. LWOP prisoners enter a rough justice kind of limbo existence. We are condemned to serve out our lives in the worst way, influencing destructive thinking: “Since I'm never getting out of prison, there's no point in me trying to be a decent convict—there's no point in me trying to be anything.” So, I got involved in things I shouldn't, making money moves. Needless to say, anyone with an LWOP sentence had never been released nor is there any sort of parole hearing down the line. All that lies ahead is a dissipation, a gradual disappearance into the ever-expanding concrete and razor wire empire of the prison system: the Pit of Hell. Family and friends run out of patience, hope, and eventually out of our lives.

I'm much older now and the days of being active are long gone. The only chances of seeing the real world come with shackles, in a bus or van on the way to a medical appointment at an

outside facility. The fresh air even smells different. I accept full responsibility for my crime. I still feel remorse and guilt for what I did. I think about it every day. After forty years of being locked up, I thank God I am still mentally able to maintain on an individual level. But in order for that to happen, I had to reinvent myself because prison life is hard. LWOP equals an infinite meaninglessness. It's hard to adjust to being around a bunch of losers who think they know it all, and as the years inevitably roll by, bitterness begins to overtake even the strongest of men, fueled by this banishing from all that is most human. I have fought the bitterness with all my might, with all my faith and love but without hope, this mighty force seems inadequate for the task.

Suddenly, out of the clear blue, a light of hope arrived. Governor Brown decided to look at the LWOP sentence; however, he is looking for a special type of convict. Commutation consideration is a major thing for an individual who has waited forty years. I'm not ready to pack my bags as of yet, because Governor Brown is looking for exemplary individuals who have stellar disciplinary and programming records. It's all about your behavior and demeanor in prison. Commutations are hard earned, no just available for the asking, or on the recommendation of staff. It's still true that, in prison, it's not what you know but *who* you know. Hey, I've had my ups and downs in prison; so, do I make that list? Well, they called me for an interview that lasted about an hour. A former ex-warden—who was a regular officer when I came to the prison—interviewed me. Sure, it went okay but will I be one of the chosen few, after forty years?

At the very core of my being, the concept of hope has been restored; however, if we are a truly just society, I feel both forms of the death penalty—both the obvious, state-administered poisoning *and* the unspoken, time-administered decomposing must be discarded. There must be a better way.