

JANUARY 26, 2005
"Growing Old"

There is a frightening and unsettling aspect to prison life that has nothing to do with living among potentially violent men, or getting beat up, raped, slashed with a razor, or stabbed in the eye with a spike. It is growing old.

While the aging process affects everyone, growing old in prison is an exceptional hardship, and inmates seldom talk about it. For those like me who are doing long sentences and have already been incarcerated for many years, there is the dread of the world going on without us. Many of us are stuck in the past. The world seems to have stopped for us. I am computer illiterate, and I have no opportunities to learn how to use one. I have never operated a CD player or used a cell phone. When I was on the outside there were no cable TV stations or VCRs, let alone DVDs. It is almost as if I am living in a time warp. The world has become much more technologically advanced than when I knew it. In a sense, I feel as if I am still living in the 1970s.

As time goes on the people who were once in a prisoner's life often drift away. Some stay, but many do not. Family members die. Others realize they can get along fine without their loved one who is in prison. Visits become less frequent. A crushing loneliness settles in when you begin to realize that you are at the mercy of your keepers. In such a stark situation some men search for God. Others stew in anger or drown themselves in a sea of regret. Imprisonment plays heavily on a man's mind.

In the more than twenty-seven years I have been behind prison walls, I know of many who have never received a visit in five, ten, fifteen, twenty or more years. Some don't even get letters. If not for the fact that their names and identification numbers appear on the Department of Correction's public access Web site, they would exist in almost total obscurity. This is scary. It is like being suspended between the living and the dead—alive within the little world of the prison system, but dead in the minds of the masses.

Your space is a small cell, or a bunk and a footlocker. Your future, if you have to spend the remainder of your life behind bars, is an eventual trip to the local potter's field, which here at this prison is hidden on a desolate hill on state-owned land where no one from the general public can go.

Day after day it goes through your mind that the world has already forgotten you. You wonder if someone will claim your body when you die. Most of all you wonder if anyone even cares.