PJP PRISON JOURNALISM PROJECT

PERSPECTIVE

When Kittens Came to My Prison, I Had Not Petted One in 15 Years

All these hard people doing hard time melted like butter.

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Images courtesy of Unsplash

Nothing in prison is soft and cuddly.

Prisons are concrete and steel and stocked with hard people doing hard time. Toughness is mandatory, brutality a virtue, as we resist — are forced to resist — the human urge for comfort. Those who do not forge themselves into weapons are viewed as prey.

Perhaps prison would have persisted this way forever. Perhaps our granite hearts and iron wills would have never crumbled. Perhaps the prison mentality, that we be cold and heartless, would have endured.

Perhaps. But then there were kittens.

At first there was just one, a wary orange tabby that prowled the yard and haunted the forbidden spaces beyond the fences like the phantom of a world long forgotten. We watched from behind glass and steel and wire and cement, watched her chase birds, stalk around, watched her be free and choose to be here, with us.

We watched her grow, gorging on the pigeons she captured and the state-provided food we left for her. Hungry prisoners saved food from their paltry portions to make offerings to this sweet creature.

In time, we realized it was not the scraps of unidentifiable meat which made her fat. No, the reason was something far more wonderful.

The blessing she bestowed on us for our gifts arrived, appropriately enough, in an unused locker on the yard's spiritual grounds, where those with nature-based faiths worship.

A litter of kittens.

From that moment on, there was a covenant among all her feeders and fawners and fans: We shall belong to these cats.

The ensuing weeks were heavy with the sounds of crinkling plastic. Canteen and package morsels — more valued items than much of the state food — were brought to the site, set like sacrifices on the altar of this creature who walked among us. We watched with reverence from behind our stoic masks as the kittens opened their eyes and took their first steps and began to explore the world they now shared with us.

Then, of course, we petted them.

I had not touched a cat in 15 years when an orange kitten wandered over to sit with me in the grass one day. I was left without adequate words to describe that experience. It reminded me that I am alive. It instilled in me a raw, unbridled happiness that I had never felt before, not even as a child.

I have spent many hours with those cats, and still I am amazed at how perfectly they reject everything it means to be in prison. They are playful and unselfconscious, curious and silly, soft and cuddly.

Sometimes it is even more interesting to watch my fellow prisoners interact with our cats. All those hard cases doing hard time melt like butter on a summer sidewalk when they visit the felines, feed them, watch them chase the birds and bees, and when they make toys to entice the cats to play with them.

I don’t think about the past when a cat hops in my lap. I don’t think of what I should or could have done. I don’t think about courts or life sentences or parole boards. What comes to mind is peace, and a sense that everything is going to be OK. What’s in the past needs to stay there if I want to have a future, if I want to be grateful for today and for the fact that I am no longer the person I once was.

The cats, of course, already know this. They are gracious enough to spend their time with us so that we might learn, and so that we can enjoy a few quiet moments of warmth, softness, non judgment, and freedom.