From Prison To
Kennedy Center Stage:

Starting over at the top

By
Dennis Sobin

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1600 K Street NW, Suite 501
Washington, DC 20006 Tel 202-393-1511
Staff@SafeStreetsArts.info

Front cover photo: Author Dennis Sobin incarcerated at the
Correctional Treatment Facility, Washington, DC (photo by Carolyn
Cosmos)

Back cover photo: Author Dennis Sobin performing on stage at the
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, DC
(photo by Donovan Berry)
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Chapter One

*A Producer in Prison*

My friend and fellow convict Jim was the first to inform me that my date of expected release held special significance for the planet. It had nothing to do with the fact that I was returning to the so-called free world after ten and half years behind bars. It was that the day, January 6th, was the Day of the Epiphany—a widely celebrated church festival. It’s when the three kings arrived in Bethlehem to bring gifts to the baby Jesus.

The word epiphany, of course, has a second, more generic meaning. The dictionary defines it as “a sudden striking understanding of something.” What would this forebode for my return? As I sat in a bus terminal on January 6, 2003 playing my new guitar, it started to come together.

The instrument was a welcome home gift from an outside friend. Too bad I didn’t have a home to go to at the time. But I still had an automobile somewhere in Washington, DC, though I could not remember where I had parked it. No, it must have been towed, or rusted away, by now. Probably towed. Nothing rusts away in the nation’s capital. People and things get melted down. That happens often. Recycling. Maybe the steel guitar strings I was playing had come from my car.

About the epiphany I was experiencing, it was the thought that freedom is not so much a place as a state of mind. During my time in prison I had learned to become happy; truly happy. I was limited in where I could go, but not in what I could think. Before my stay in prison, just the opposite was true.

My trial in a Bible Belt section of Florida in 1992 was a casebook example of injustice to the extreme. Without facts or evidence to convict me, the prosecutor told the jury to consider what was going through my mind when I produced a documentary for cable television. Its subject: clothes-optional beaches and resorts in the state known for oranges and political outrages. The video was done tastefully; it was wholesome. But the jury was asked to consider what if it fell into the wrong hands? What if children turned on a television or video player and watched?

In any other part of America, prosecuting someone for such a work of media art would be absurd. But not in Pasco County, Florida, where fundamentalist churches abounded and the resorts that I captured in my documentary are both a legal embarrassment and a closely guarded secret. The prosecutor himself, now in private
practice representing defendants, seemed miffed that an over-zealous vice cop had arrested me. But he was caught in a bind. He couldn’t go against the police since they were on the same team. So he offered me a plea deal that my attorney said I’d be crazy not to accept. I could walk away with a small fine if I pleaded to a minor, mundane offense. Trespassing would do. I wouldn’t, I didn’t and today, if I had to do it over, I still wouldn’t. In fact I was so outraged at the time that I spoke out boldly against the prosecutor, the police and local politicians in the press. I had taken my naïve notion of America as a free society to heart. But they were all twiddling their thumbs and reading their Bibles while they watched this travesty unfold. This was more than a town without pity. It was a place without common sense.

The prosecutor didn’t like my words of criticism. So he moved forward on all counts. He even added a few as he went along. I would not only be charged in state court with producing a potentially hazardous video, but in federal court for not having all my financial ducks in a row. I’ll be the first to admit that my bookkeeping was not the best. But my dealings with people were always honest. Even the prosecutor couldn’t find anyone who could claim otherwise. But honesty and observing financial regulations are not always one and the same.

So I went through two trials. Acquitted of most counts, I was convicted of others. Throughout the ordeal, I felt as if I were being chased by an angry mob, each member with a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other. The barrage of bullets came at me like a hailstorm. Inevitably, some hit. When the smoke cleared, I found myself on my way to spending the next 10 years and 4 months of my life in state and federal prisons serving consecutive sentences.

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One of the attorneys who wrote to me while I was in prison about the injustice of my situation, said I wasn’t unique. “The criminal justice system in America is a cesspool.” He said this after reflecting on some of his clients who had drowned in it. He had handled the cases of death row inmates, some of whom had been victims of mistaken identity. The government had made errors in condemning them but was not about to correct itself. Better to bury its mistakes.

By the time I had gotten the letter from this sympathetic attorney, I had heard from other people on the inside and the outside about mistakes. From fellow prisoners I got alarming tales, from outsiders I got facts and figures to show that what happened to me is common.
The United States is the world’s largest jailer. We can afford to put millions in prison because of our great wealth. We do this because there is paranoia in a multi-ethnic, multi-idea culture. Diversity brings fear. Such fear can be overcome but the process is not easy. Sometimes it is easier to confine those we fear—people who look or act differently than the majority, who chose pot over booze, commercial sex over romantic coupling, and self defense over calling the cops. Because such individuals don’t think like the majority, people often feel uncomfortable around them. Society puts them out of sight so they’ll be out of mind. It’s an expensive way to handle fear and prejudice. But a rich country can afford it.

Could it be worse? Certainly. We no longer have slavery, no longer have lynchings, never had a Holocaust as in Europe, didn’t have a revolution where we beheaded and executed our leaders. Even the much despised George W. Bush was not harmed. Nor has his black successor to the White House, Barack Obama. Not bad for a country with a long history of violence, discrimination and hatred.

Still we send large numbers to jail. In one sense it’s a way to vent our bigotries and frustrations. By having so many jails and prisons—more than 5,000 across the nation—we have constructed edifices telling citizens that we don’t live in such a free society after all. We can’t hurt others, not even their feelings. That’s America; love it or leave it. You leave it when you go to prison.

Whose feelings did I hurt to deserve such expulsion? The answer, virtually everyone in a large swath of Florida who didn’t want its shameful secrets revealed or its prosecutor, the elected keeper of those secrets, vilified.

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My epiphany upon release from prison confirmed the insight I got during my decade there. America is a free society largely to the extent that people are free to get in trouble and be thrown in jail. Think of it in terms of living on a flat mountain top, a plateau. You’re safe as long as you don’t wander near the edges. If you do, you stand in danger of falling off.

In another country with a reputation for not being free, you have fences all around the perimeter of that plateau. Citizens are restricted in what they can read, what types of television they can watch, what movies they can see, what politics they can practice, and the rules go on. If you’re not used to living in such a country, you feel intimidated, almost suffocated. That’s how visitors react.
But the more one thinks about it, the rules there are clear, the fences are as obvious as they are imposing. To fall off the mountain, you’re going to have to do some serious scaling of the barriers around you. In other words, unlike America, dropping off the side is not as easy as wandering to the edges.

My friend Ben brought this point home to me when we played music together in prison. He was my senior, a wise man who left a highly successful life behind him. He had operated successful businesses, making a comfortable living for himself and his family. Ben was one of the first entrepreneurs in America to recognize the enormous potential and profit of cell phones. He made his killing during the early days, and then knew enough to get out when the telephone giants entered and took over the field. It didn’t matter at that point since Ben was able to bankroll other ventures in which he also excelled. If you met the man you would understand why. Kind and low-key in every way, people feel comfortable talking to him. They sense his honesty, his underlying energy, his drive to make friends and to make money.

I’ve met few people in my life who have embodied more of the American spirit than this hardworking, insightful, outgoing and dedicated businessman. Ben loved America with all its flags, traditions, history and affluence. And America loved Ben, bestowing wealth and pride in him that made his tall frame walk erect, his head held high. A strong influence on his children, they also excelled in the American dream. One boy brought particular honor to Ben by rising to major rank in the military. When Ben and I got out of prison, he would email me about his son’s accomplishments. They weren’t minor, as the military itself recognized. His officer son participated in public forums, a well-spoken man full of ideals and determination. Great at connecting with people, he was a significant asset to the goal of furthering the ideas and standing of his country. A chip off the old block in every way.

So how did such a model father and exemplary citizen as Ben end up in prison for years, losing his wife, much of his wealth, and nearly all of his sanity? His wife left him when she started and then stopped drinking, meeting her new soul mate and sex partner at an AA meeting. Ben’s wealth dissipated because he wasn’t able to manage it in prison where rules about “not conducting a business” are firmly enforced. His sanity slipped with the daily grind of prison life, turning Ben from a patient man into a short fuse. I remember when he yelled at a prison officer for no good reason. “I pay more in taxes on the outside than your entire salary!” he screamed.
What was Ben’s criminal offense that required him to turn in his suit and tie for a shabby prison outfit? From being a taxpayer to becoming a tax burden? From occupying a spacious suburban home to living in a small barren bathroom, which best describes a prison cell with its toilet, sink and bunk bed compressed into a tiny space?

Ben had pressed the wrong key on his personal computer.

That was it. I know it’s hard to fathom. If you believe that America is truly free as Ben did, you would think that a person can do as he wishes with his own computer. Even break it, as long as he doesn’t do it over someone’s head. Even if he presses a key that will destroy all of the data on his computer, what difference does it make if the data was his?

Ben in fact hit the save button on his computer so he didn’t destroy anything. The prosecutor said he should have destroyed what he was looking at. Then he wouldn’t have gone to prison.

What kind of double talk is that coming from the mouth of a powerful prosecutor? A person who can drag anyone into court. And whose authority is so scary that he or she can convince most people who are dragged there to plead guilty to something, anything, innocent or guilty. Or risk a sentence of double or triple what is being offered.

Who wouldn’t plead guilty to avoid that? I am the exception. Not that I am completely alone in my stubbornness. But the percentage is small; in some regions of America as few as one in fifty defendants insist on their right to a trial. Can we blame Ben and others for pleading guilty even when they felt they weren’t? I couldn’t understand them for being so gutless. But in the summer of 2008, five and a half years after I exited prison, I followed their example. It pains me to admit it, that I stood in front of a judge and pleaded guilty when I knew I was innocent. But I was desperate to stay out of jail to be able to produce the second annual “From Prison to the Stage” program at the Kennedy Center. My sister had brought the action against me after I sought an accounting of my inheritance that she and my son had stolen from me when I was in prison. She was anxious to send me back.

So at the age of 64, I played the game for the first time in my life. Saying I was guilty, apologizing for my alleged crime, assuring the judge I knew I did wrong and that it would not be repeated. Then falling on the mercy of the court. Instead of years in prison, my sentence amounted to only days in jail; and I got time off for good behavior. Did I feel good a few days later when I was free again? Frankly, I was too busy preparing for the Kennedy Center to feel anything. I now know why innocent people plead guilty.
If what I did in communicating by email in a pleasant manner to my sister was a crime, Ben's action in pushing the save key on his computer wasn't anything but his own personal business. What did he save? He saved images that he found on the Internet that were considered to be "inappropriate." What were those images? I don't know since Ben didn't show them to me. He couldn't because when the police hauled him away they also took his computer. I suspect they involved pictures of over-aged or under-aged individuals in less than full clothing. Ben had been curious, so he looked at them. Can't a person in a free society do that? Even the prosecutor admitted that a person can. But he said that the line is drawn when it comes to saving such images, and Ben had crossed that line.

If that makes sense to you, you're a lot smarter than Ben and me. When looking at something on the Internet and you want to save it so you can see it later, why not push the save button as Ben did? Who would know this fine point of the law?

When a person pleads guilty as Ben did, the law is not questioned. All one does is stand before a judge, lower his head, and say he's sorry. Ben said to me in prison, "What's the good of living in a free country if it means you're only free to go to jail? Why don't politicians tell us how easy it is to wind up here? I love this country but we need to stop pretending that we're free. I'm not saying that I want freedom since I know it can lead to problems in the wrong hands. I just want to know what the score is up front. I want the government to level with us."

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A truthful politician is like an honest con man. The term is an oxymoron. I once ran for mayor of Washington, DC on an honesty platform and was trounced severely. I could hardly get the truth out of my mouth about the absurdity of the drug war, the waste of using police for morality enforcement, and other issues before my opponents laughed at me. One of them was Marion Barry, the victor in that election. He supported the drug laws though he himself was using drugs at the time. When elected, he became careless and was caught in his hypocrisy. He got six months at the Federal Correctional Institution in Petersburg, Virginia. The same place that I would be headed a few years later.

I guess I was a hypocrite also in that election. While I opposed drug laws, I didn't personally use drugs. I had no problem with self control, with abstinence. So why would I care about the laws that force people to do what I did voluntarily? Laws that punish them if
they can’t or won’t abstain from drugs, commercial sex, questionable computer downloads or many other prohibited practices. Why wouldn’t I, like other serious office seekers, want to keep these laws in effect? What right did I have to go against majority rule? If the bulk of the population wants a law, why speak out against it no matter how wasteful or selectively enforceable it is? Particularly if my behavior is not personally affected by it. Let the public have its fun by locking up millions of people who are different than they are. It’s their money to run expensive prisons for their neighbors who they will be incarcerating.

Just like my coming around to pleading guilty to something I didn’t do late in life, I learned my lesson on the campaign trail. When I run for office again—should that occur—I will not give the faintest hint of hypocrisy. If I again propose the decriminalization of drugs, I will use them boldly on the campaign trail. And if I don’t use them, I will keep my mouth shut about proposing something to upset the majority.

When I arrived in prison after the election, I was asked by inmates who hadn’t followed my campaign how I did. I said, “I got 2,000 votes and 10 years in prison.” They were impressed, particularly the short timers.

No more mixing honesty and politics for me. It’s too combustible a combination; the one ingredient is incompatible with the other.

In one sense, Barry went to prison for his being too honest also. He didn’t hesitate during the election to tell people the truth in private, including novices in the political arena like me. “You can count on politicians to do just one thing,” he said, “and that’s lie.” If I run again, I will not tell the truth. I have already spent enough time in prison, having spoken more truth than most people convey in 10 lifetimes. I hope that my constituents will forgive me this small exercise in survival.

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Ben continued to love America when he got out of prison. He understood it better after his experience. Though not a free society, he considered it still a magnificent one. When politicians speak of the United States being the capital of the free world, he could now wink along with them. We are the wealthiest nation on the planet. Perhaps material abundance and personal freedom are not compatible with each other. How else to keep the poor and politically unconnected in check except to have many of them locked up. That means a multitude of pervasive, complex and often illogical laws.
Should individuals become troublemakers they will be accused of running afoul of them, and be removed from society. The wealthy and powerful don’t have to worry. They rise above laws. It’s one reason why people want to acquire riches, even if they don’t value the trinkets money can buy. The person whom you are, rather than what you did, can keep you out of prison. That’s why people strive for success in America. The autos and airplanes are nice, but the greasing of the system that money provides is better. Ted Kennedy didn’t go to prison for drowning an extra-marital girlfriend. Richard Nixon didn’t for burglarizing the Watergate, and Bill Clinton didn’t for sexually exploiting an intern and then lying under oath about it.

Ben, on the outside, was soon back to his old entrepreneurial self. A sadder but wiser man, he could have argued with his military son about the shortcomings of America, as I did with my government lawyer son. But he didn’t. As a result, Ben’s son sent his father to glamorous places around the world. My son sent me to jail, albeit for relatively short stays. Once for entering City Hall to testify at a public hearing after he engineered a stay away order against me. I was impressed as I sat in jail, just as Hitler’s father must have been impressed to see similar bold cunning and blind ambition in his offspring. In Hitler’s case, the goal was genocide by gas; in my son’s, patricide by law.

I was surprised that Ben didn’t at least resent a relatively new development in America that restricted freedom. Statutes were suddenly being passed mandating that certain categories of law violators register with their local police departments, who would in turn put out their photo, name and address on the Internet. This would allow potential employers and landlords to reject them and for vigilantes full of hate to track them down and kill them. That’s the way it played out in a number of instances. The yellow Star of David imposed by the Nazis on outer garments worn by Jews was in some ways more merciful. At least names and addresses were not printed in newspapers or scrawled on the walls of public buildings.

Affected by the new laws, Ben withheld judgment on them for a while. He wanted to know whether he had enough pull to get exempted from them. As it turned out, he had. So he remained silent. He let his lawyer do the talking, and then only to get his exemption. America worked after all. Why had he ever doubted it? You get what you pay for in a capitalist society, whether quality legal services or special exemptions. Ben was able to pay since he had set up a new and successful business with another son.

Don’t think by the tone of this discussion that I am at odds with Ben in any way. Or even with his capitalist philosophy. What is
the alternative? Communism? We already know that it doesn’t work. It’s not just a matter of history but common sense. If everyone is going to be compensated the same despite unequal talent and effort, most people will not exert themselves. If new inventions or inventiveness go unrewarded, people will not think at all. They simply will do mundane, repetitive tasks needed to get by. To hell with motivation cuts and higher productivity. These things won’t make a person any richer in a communist society.

You must understand that like Ben, I’ve had my share of special privileges. That short sentence I received in mid-2008, almost 16 years after being handed my 10-year sentence, was not solely because I pleaded guilty. It was because my standing and influence in the community was high. The judge knew about the annual extravaganza at the Kennedy Center that I produced, and also about the successful Prison Art Gallery I had created. He knew too about the classical guitar playing I learned in prison that got me publicity and appreciative audiences. And most of what I did, I donated without fee. I have never been materialistic, so this wasn’t a big sacrifice. What can money achieve compared to the friends one makes when contributing to the public good?

In sentencing me to the few days in jail in 2008, the judge said “I’d sentence you to a period of community service, but you already do so much of that.” I was relieved because court-ordered community service in Washington involves clearing trash from streets and sidewalks while you wear a brightly colored vest identifying you as a forced laborer. Its lettering tells the world that you are a criminal compelled by the court to do this. People look at you as if you are working on a chain gang, and the comparison is not farfetched.

Being on the same wavelength with Ben, more or less, I got along well with him during and after our time in prison together. He exited before me, which turned out to be a blessing. Shortly before Ben left, I completed the recording of 33 songs for a CD I was producing, Prison Tracks. It was done in secret at the prison with the cooperation of sympathetic staff. One officer in particular was a catalyst, providing a boom box for the project. The cassette player was normally used for exercise classes in the prison gym, which I attended. During one session of the class, I noticed that it had a recording capability. By then I had been in prison for eight years and never saw such a device on the inside. But here it was. An opportunity I didn’t want to pass up.

I made arrangements with the amiable staffer to take the machine to another prison building where the music room was located. My prison job was to clean that room. For a few minutes each day I
cleaned, and then spent several hours playing the guitars there. It was a great job. Suddenly I would make it better by having not just a rehearsal space but a recording studio.

One of the things that inspired me to do the CD was the recent arrival on the compound of a master guitarist named Steve Andrew. He’d won awards for his playing on the outside. Hearing him play, I wasn’t surprised. Steve didn’t know it, but in listening, I was auditioning him. Before I told him about the recording project I was planning, I wanted to see whether he would fit in. We played some songs together. I concluded that we performed well as a duet.

I wanted the planned album to consist of instrumentals for a few reasons. First, I knew that it would have universal appeal. Without words, people of any language and culture could enjoy it. We even included Christian and Jewish religious songs. Who’s going to take exception since not even the word God is used? No words are used since there is no singing. Also, no one can criticize the quality of a voice since we kept it purely instrumental.

In addition to artistic reasons for making it an instrumental CD, there were practical production ones. The recorder I was given to use was not high quality, to say the least. It could minimally do the job in recording the guitars, but couldn’t handle a voice with any reproductive authenticity. It simply wasn’t good enough. I was reminded of the early days of recording more than 100 years ago when piano pieces were performed on guitar because the six strings of a guitar, when plucked, rang clearly. Recording a piano with early equipment produced a muffled sound. A voice recorded in the same disappointing way.

A final reason for using two guitars—one played by Steve and the other by me—was that we had only two recording tracks available on the boom box and just two microphones that we were able to dig up in the prison so we would use one for each track. Steve and I positioned our guitars close to the mics. We first did a few tests to find an appropriate sound level. That meant moving various distances from the mics until there was good balance. Then we proceeded to do the recording. If we didn’t like one of the takes, we erased it and did it over. Here was the ultimate in live recording.

One of the reasons we erased rather than saved inferior tracks was that we didn’t have a lot of tape to spare. Finding recording tape in prison proved as difficult as locating the recorder and microphones. Ben was vital in helping us acquire tape, using all his entrepreneurial skills for the search. He located a supply of religious tapes in the chapel, befriending the inmate aide there who catalogued and kept an eye on the chapel tapes. Ben told him the importance of the project
for which tape was needed, without going into detail. Inmates know not to be too curious. It’s a sign of disrespect as well as a way of putting oneself at risk if a project turns out to be problematic. In our case, we were trampling over rules that said “no recording” in prison.

A tape was located, one rarely used in the chapel. It would not be missed. I scratched the incriminating religious label off it. Steve and I were now ready to record over the sermon it contained, replacing the religious message with our guitar duets.

The recording of the 33 songs was done over a three-day period. Considering that we only had the mornings available, that was a lot of music to record. The afternoons were not feasible because an unfriendly officer who sometimes entered the music room started his shift at noon. We couldn’t take a chance of the project being aborted. If that happened we would never have another opportunity to do it.

We accomplished the three-day miracle because we were well rehearsed. Steve and I had spent an entire month going over the music. We must have played the songs we intended to record dozens of times. When we finally got the boom box, the mics and the tape for the recording sessions, we were ready to breeze through the tunes. It helped that I could read music. I’m not talking about merely knowing guitar chords. More than that, I can read individual notes. If you put a piece of music in front of me, I can play the melody on the spot, despite never having heard the song before.

Steve was impressed. With all his guitar awards and competitive wins, he couldn’t do it. I realize now that very few people can play the guitar that way. Had I known that when I set out to learn how to sight read in prison, I might not have tried. Sometimes it’s best to approach a difficult task with blind optimism. I decided to teach myself how to read music when I was sent to the hole for a few months. How I got there is a long story which I have covered in other writing. Most people wind up in the hole for hurting someone. I was there for hurting the pride of the warden who tried to impose an unfair rule on all of us, a rule I ignored.

While in the hole, I had books and writing materials. So it wasn’t a big hardship. I had a catalog of music books from which to order anything, thanks to the support of outside friends. I thought, what good is sheet music if I can only read chords? There’s no guitar to use in the hole. In looking over the instructional books, I tried to find one that would teach me how to sight read notes to play with a guitar. But the catalog contained none. I thought this was odd. Perhaps sight reading for guitar was such an easy task that no one felt the need to write an instructional book on how to do it. Or maybe it
was so difficult that few people attempted it. After all, the guitar is not a concert orchestra instrument like the violin or woodwinds. Players of those instruments have to sight read so that they can play their parts precisely in ensembles. Guitar playing in bands on the other hand is simply a lot of chords and lead riffs, which are largely improvised. If the music has to be repeated for performances, it’s generally done through rote memory. Even classical guitarists often can’t sight-read. That doesn’t mean they can’t read notes, since most of them can. But if they can’t relate the notes automatically and instantly to the guitar neck, they can’t sight-read.

Constructing a paper guitar in the hole with a complete fret board, I worked out my own system for sight-reading. I even wrote a manual on how to do it, which I have since shared with others. When I got out of the hole, I put my plan into practice. Indeed, practice is the means to all music accomplishment. By the time I sat down with Steve to record a year later, I was ready. Steve played chords while I played melodies. For the “breaks” or interludes within each song, I played chords while Steve did terrific improvisation on the melody. Not able to read music, he was as creative as he wished.

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Ben’s assistance in the production of the Prison Tracks CD did not stop after he supplied the vital tape. Equally important was getting the completed cassette off the compound and in the hands of Lee Amirault. I approached Ben about handling this difficult matter. He was in an ideal position to do it since he was leaving prison shortly. His sentence was finally coming to an end.

Lee had completed his own term of imprisonment the previous year; I would be leaving the following year. In fact, Lee and I had been set to exit together, but good fortune came his way. He won a victory when his lawyer appealed his case. The bulk of his conviction was thrown out. The appeals court said that, as Lee had been telling us all along, he was truly innocent. At least for the most part. The higher court allowed a minor charge to stand, equivalent to trespassing. We guessed that the appeals court had to give a small concession to the trial judge. After all, these guys were in bed together, and when out of bed they were on the golf course comparing their putting and the positions of their balls.

When Lee found out about the appellate victory, he had cause to celebrate big time. It almost certainly meant that he would leave prison immediately. The final decision would be up to his original judge who had to re-sentence Lee on the minor charge. We all
congratulated Lee, very pleased that he had triumphed in his appeal; happy that one of us had gotten justice. Unfortunately, his judge did not share that view.

You’ve heard the expression, you give someone an inch and they take a mile? Or, there’s more than one way to skin a cat? Or the term, sore loser? All of these applied to Lee’s judge. He didn’t let Lee go home for “time served,” which in itself would have been excessive considering he had already spent years in prison for something that warranted only a few months, if any, time. Instead, the judge in his re-sentencing issued an unusually harsh sentence that would keep Lee in prison longer. In his retaliation, the judge still had to follow the law. So he could go just so far. That meant Lee would leave prison earlier than if he hadn’t won his appeal but not much.

We stayed in touch when he got out. I was excited to learn that he had followed through with his plans to set up a recording studio in his home. He was waiting for the tape that Steve and I had recorded. He would mix it and do the post-production work so that we’d have a finished CD.

But I had to get the tape to him first. Mailing it to him was not an option. Feeling the bulkiness of the cassette tape in an envelope, the prison mailroom staff would almost certainly inspect and seize it. We needed a surer way, and Ben was the answer.

When you spend years in prison you tend to accumulate a number of things. Books, letters, legal papers and personal projects ranging from art to prose writing. As a result, you usually carry a box or two out the front gate upon departure. Ben could easily take the tape with him when he left. There would be a brief examination of his boxes, but so superficial that it would not be detected. I have no idea what they look for in the possessions of departing prisoners. What could possibly be taken out that is of any importance to the prison? Another inmate concealed in one of the small boxes?

Ben agreed to do it. When he got home he sent the tape to Lee. Lee’s modern studio, combined with his talent as a sound engineer, led to a good quality CD, despite its humble origin.

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Later in this story, both Ben and Lee show up again prominently. They were important in making the Kennedy Center show a success—Ben in the first season and Lee in the second.

In Ben’s case, he became a patron and helped fund the program. I admired him for doing that. It occurred to me, however, that it was nothing new for him, or for that matter, other successful business
people. It’s a long-standing American tradition. Everyone from Hearst to Carnegie to Rockefeller have donated money to the arts. Carnegie Hall was named after the famous industrialist for that reason.

What had Ben’s patronage been before the Kennedy Center show? Quite a bit. He couldn’t give money in prison for support of the CD production or the concerts that Lee, others and I gave with our prison band. There is no cash in prison; the only purchase an inmate can make is with his commissary card. Functioning as a debit card it automatically takes funds out of an inmate’s bank account. The account can be replenished with money orders sent by people on the outside.

Ben’s money wasn’t needed in prison where everything is free, including food and entertainment. Band members are not paid to rehearse or perform. And rehearsals can be intensive. Since the band is not just playing for friends but for neighbors, the quality of their music tends to be high. If not, they will be disappointing the people closest to them, in essence, everyone in prison. You’ve never really lived in a small town unless you spend time in prison. If you’re good at something there, such as music, everyone knows about it. And if you’re not, they know about that too. Word spreads faster than you can say, “guess who escaped today?”

Ben helped the band in various ways, including attending rehearsals where his comments and suggestions were helpful. They led to better shows. The fact that Ben played some harmonica, one of his prison accomplishments, gave him a feel for what we were doing.

He really shone, however, in the production of the *Prison Tracks* CD. The tape he contributed was better than a pot of gold. Even Carnegie could not have been more valuable to an arts project.

When Ben agreed to get the tape to Lee on the outside, he showed patronage above and beyond the call of duty. Would Rockefeller have done it, an individual by all accounts who might have ended up in prison if not for his money to protect him? I’d like to think that he would.

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Lee figured prominently in the second season of the “From Prison to the Stage” show I produced at the Kennedy Center after prison. We had written several musicals on the inside together, sometimes with the help of other theater-minded inmates. We intended to produce the last one together when we got out. Not only did we consider it our best work, but it was the only one still in our
possession. The others had gone AWOL. Literally, they had flown the coop with an inmate we had trusted. The inmate, Robert “Bo” Ayers, was released from prison before Lee, Ben and me. His sentence was only a few months. Of all of us, he had actually done something to land him there.

Bo had fallen on hard times in Washington, DC, and couldn’t figure out a way to rise to his former heights without resorting to illegal means. In the prime of his career as a musician he had been on the road in the backup bands of such icons as Elvis and Liberace. “Liberace was very generous,” he told me. “Elvis was very dedicated and took rehearsals seriously.” Bo proved his pedigree in two ways. He knew his facts about the stars he claimed to work with, and he played music so well that I could see why he was such an asset to legendary showmen. A piano player and organist of the first rank, he was unstoppable in the few months he spent with us. Also, unstumpable. There wasn’t a song he couldn’t play. Mention a tune and Bo would pick it right up. And if it was an obscure song, all you had to do was hum a little and he’d play it.

After Elvis fatally OD’d and Liberace contracted a terminal case of AIDS, Bo became small potatoes, though his big talent remained in place. He joined a successful regional group in DC called the Capitol Steps. They trusted his musical ability implicitly, and Bo never let them down. They also trusted his personal integrity; but that proved a big mistake. Bo wormed his way into the finances of the group, and then robbed them blind. He told me in prison that the devil made him do it, in this case the devil being his ex-wife. She had wanted more than he could give her with his reduced earnings. So he decided to supplement his income with embezzlement. Getting caught with his hand in the cookie jar, it didn’t get slapped too badly. Because Bo had a tangible victim whose limited damage could be measured, the judge felt compelled to mete out minor punishment. In the case of Ben, Lee and me, we had no victim except the conservatism and sensibility of society. Our judges went overboard to appease mass prejudice. In handing out punishment, the sky was the limit.

Lee, fellow playwrights and I at FCI Petersburg had finished writing our first three musicals when Bo arrived. These plays featured original songs and dealt in some way with the prison experience. The first was about contemporary prisons, the second about past prisons and the third about prisons of the future. We had fine-tuned these plays by doing readings of them to our fellow inmates and then performing the songs we wrote for them. The feedback we received allowed us to make improvements. Bo also
proved helpful in that regard. He told us that he wanted to help because he'd once written a musical himself. It didn't go anywhere but Bo did, unfortunately. Shortly after his play's rejection, he decided to give up efforts in legitimate theater and go for illegitimate income.

Did his prison term help him straighten up and fly right? Had he become a different person due to his months away from society? Can anyone benefit from an absence of normalcy?

If anything, Bo left in worse shape than when he came in. Sometimes when you lose your momentum on the outside, it's hard to get back into the groove. That's a factor that helps create the revolving prison door. A person who has problems on the outside before coming to jail will have more when he or she leaves. The very status of being an ex-prisoner is a problem. There's also the chip on one's shoulder, the desire to strike back. I'm sorry to say that the prison playwrights that Bo left behind, including me, were the people he found most convenient to hurt. I guess he viewed us as powerless since we were still stuck in prison.

Just as Bo had gained the trust of colleagues on the outside, so had he secured our trust on the inside. He set us up and we fell for it.

Did he believe in the concept of honor among thieves? Whether or not he did, he knew by the end of his sentence that he was unique in our theatrical clique for being the only thief among us. As a result he felt no loyalty. He stole from us just as he had taken from Capitol Steps.

Perhaps even his modus operandi was the same. I'm not sure how he got into a position to betray Capitol Steps but I surmise he volunteered to help keep their finances in order. The group didn't look a gift horse in the mouth, but it should have. It might have detected that there was a dishonest person lurking inside that animal.

When the same gift horse arrived in our prison, we too should have scrutinized it. But in prison one tends not to question, much less reject acts of kindness. There aren't that many that come your way. Bo said to us, "I'll be released from prison next week. Let me take your three plays and prepare them for production so you'll have them in a neat and presentable form. I'll even musically notate all the songs. That way you'll have the sheet music; then your plays will be complete."

We knew that Bo could do all he promised. He was a good typist and a great notater of music. It seemed like a dream come true for us. Our only hesitation was that we didn't want to impose on him. "Are you sure," I said, "that you're going to have the time to do it
when you get out? There are three full-length plays here and some 40 songs.

“I’ll definitely have the time. What else am I going to do when I get out? I don’t have anything to go back to.”

We never found out if he had the time or not. Or if he did what he promised. That’s because we never heard from Bo again. It was tragic since we didn’t have a copy of our work that he took with him. It just wasn’t possible to make a copy in the week that we had before Bo left. The material was too voluminous and our copier connections weren’t up to the task.

So our hard work walked away with him. When Lee got out, he tried to find Bo, but the man had disappeared. I made the same effort when I exited prison. By then his trail was even colder.

In the years I’ve been out of prison, I’ve kept an eye out for Bo, and an ear open for our musicals. I fully expect to hear word that at least one of them is being produced, perhaps in a small theater. That would be flattering; someone likes your material and thinks its potential is great enough to steal it.

That in fact happened to me once before my prison days. I had struck it rich in the pay-per-call phone industry, making over two million dollars in a single year. I was one of the first to introduce social chat lines where callers paid a modest amount per minute to join in conversations. The key to success was in promoting these lines. I did that through a newspaper I published called Met Personals, which not only featured personal classified ads but alternative articles like those in the Village Voice. I also produced a radio show which promoted the chat lines. But my most creative idea was to launch a TV series. I pitched it to a businessman in Philadelphia to see if he wanted to be my partner. I didn’t have the experience in this kind of production to do it alone.

When he didn’t get back to me I assumed he wasn’t interested. It wasn’t a big disappointment since I already had a full plate in my life. I guessed the idea wasn’t good enough to fly on TV, in his opinion. What did I know about that medium?

One day I ran into a TV cameraman whom I knew. He had just been hired to shoot a TV show, my TV show. He congratulated me for having such a great idea that would now be seen by millions. Stunned, I kept my silence. I wanted to pry more information from him. “You’re going to be at the shooting aren’t you?” he said. I assured him that I would and he told me where it was. I said I’d see him there. On the day of the shoot I entered the set nonchalantly. The man who’d stolen my idea was there in all his glory. He did a double-take when he saw me, but only a small one. Being in show
business he was obviously prepared for anything and he knew how to put on an act.

There was no reason to confront him since my being there spoke for itself. It would have been foolhardy of me to start a ruckus. I had designed a boat that could carry us to an island of riches. To do anything to cause the boat to capsize as the trip progressed would have been self-defeating. Let the boat arrive at its destination. Then we could argue about how to divide the treasure.

It never made it. The idea for the show—my idea—proved a flop. The thief had done me a favor by taking it off my hands and running with it. He ran right into a stone wall. Putting both his time and money into the project, he saved me from wasting both. Sometimes even our enemies can be helpful.

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Had Bo done me and my incarcerated collaborators a favor? I believe that he had. Even if he did not produce the plays we wrote—which I assume he didn’t—we benefited. Perhaps he threw them in the garbage. As a thief, Bo would not have done that if he felt the plays had value. He apparently did not think they did; and to this day, I trust his judgment.

At the same time it was flattering that he stole them in the first place. After all, theft is the sincerest form of flattery. I would have felt worse had he returned them. Or even sent us a note saying that he had no time to type or musically notate them, as he had promised to do. What interpretation would we have given such a note? That our plays weren’t good enough to take up his time? That there were higher priorities he had? What priorities could a newly released inmate have who by his own admission had no plans or commitments?

In assuming our plays were so good that a person of Bo’s competence and connections would steal them, we felt more motivated than ever to continue writing. That would not have happened had we started to doubt the quality of our writing rather than the content of Bo’s character. The next play Lee and I wrote was our best, by all admissions. Eventually it would get its debut at the Kennedy Center.

Maybe playwright Arthur Miller traveled the same stony path before his work achieved great heights. The Crucible by Miller could not have been written in a single draft. It’s too powerful and too carefully crafted. It also happens to be one of my favorite plays. One of the reasons is that it dealt with events similar to what I had
experienced in Pasco County, Florida, when I was falsely accused of an imaginary crime there.

_The Crucible_ dealt with the bogus offense of witchcraft. It covered the trial of 21 people who were convicted and executed for such an offense in Salem, Massachusetts, a town in a relatively enlightened region of the country that should have known better.

When you are dealing with a victimless crime, anything can happen. People’s fears get exaggerated, particularly when families and the protection of minors are involved. Sometimes, such protection derives from guilt. Because people don’t do as much as they feel they should for their families, they want to demonstrate their commitment to them by hurting others. It’s like a brother who is not kind to his sister but will punch anyone who looks at her the “wrong” way.

My trial took place in 1992, exactly three hundred years after the 1692 Salem witchcraft trials. Even though I’ve been exonerated since then, I have yet to receive an apology from those who attacked and prosecuted me. It took the town of Salem a long time to admit and apologize for its mistake—in fact more than 20 years—for killing 21 innocent and harmless people.

I assume that will hold true for me. But first I have to die. If not dead, I’d be able to sue for the injustice. How great would the amount be? And did I really suffer?

Not according to my estranged son and sister who said in correspondence to me when I was in prison that I wasn’t taking my sentence seriously. Maybe they felt this way since I wrote to them in ink, just as they used, not blood. Or perhaps they believed that families left behind by the incarcerated suffer more than those who go to jail. They could be correct about that as the next chapter will argue. But why take that out on me? True, I didn’t take the misdemeanor plea deal that would have allowed me to walk away. All I had to do was plead guilty to something I didn’t do. I know that most people would have gone that route to avoid being locked up. Maybe my sister and son would have done that. But in the end, I knew I had to live with myself no matter where I lay my head at night. I couldn’t do it.

The resentment by them could have come from thinking I was showing off. Trying to put myself in the role of a hero. Maybe they were dumping on me as a chance to topple the king. A son can easily see his father that way. The same with a younger sister. Whatever it was, it brought the two of them closer to each other. They then cemented their bond by joining together to steal my inheritance and savings.
I wonder what became of the possessions of the witches who were tried and executed in Salem. Did those who condemned them share in the loot? A new play ought to be written on that subject, perhaps called *The Crucible Revisited*. That would be something that I’d like to produce now that I’ve made my reputation as a producer at the Kennedy Center.
Chapter 2

The Truth about Prison Life

People are generally surprised to learn that a person in prison is less likely to be assaulted or murdered than someone who lives in a typical American city. It’s even more surprising when you consider all the idleness in prison. Inmates have the time to commit mayhem. What they lack is motive and opportunity.

Most murders and attacks on the outside take place during robberies or when illegal business deals go awry. In prison, there isn’t much motivation to rob someone because inmates generally have little to take. Even for the wealthy who go to prison, there’s a limit on how much money they can have sent to them monthly. And it all must go to their canteen account. With no cash to take, what can a robber steal? Inmates carry the equivalent of a debit card, which also doubles as their prison ID. The only place to use it is at the canteen which is a tiny variety store with the barest of items. And prisoners can go there just once a week depending on the living quarters where they reside. Moreover, the debit ID contains the inmate’s photo. If a prisoner tries to present one and doesn’t look like the person shown, he will be escorted to the hole by the officers assigned to safeguard the canteen. In the hole he will sit for a week or so until a sergeant or lieutenant comes by to ask questions. Unconvincing answers will keep the person in the hole longer. The extended stay is called “being under investigation.”

There is also “home invasion” in prison. The burglar is usually looking for the one possession that’s of some value and that most prisons allow: portable personal radios. But these invasions, though more common than robberies, are also rare. For one thing, a cell is not easy to break into. Consider how difficult it is to break out of one. Lockers are used in dormitory-style housing units. They are generally secured by padlocks. To be burglarized in prison one normally has to be careless, forgetting to secure a locker or close a cell.

How does an inmate lock his own cell? In some prisons he has the key to it, though that’s rare. Usually he slides it shut when he leaves and then asks the cellblock officer to open it—electronically or by key—upon his return. In fact, prisoners spend most of their time outside their cells in dayrooms, work details, recreation and other activities. Only during lockdowns is occupying a cell a constant.

Even when radios are stolen, there’s a good chance they’ll be returned. It’s the practice of canteens to engrave each radio with the
name and number of the inmate who purchased it. When periodic searches by officers are made of inmate’s cells for contraband, radios are one of the first things examined for proper ownership. Here the police are doing their job well, for which inmates who have been robbed are grateful.

Robbery is rare in prison because thieves, like other professionals, need a reason to practice their craft. Aside from the adrenaline rush, there isn’t much reward in doing it in prison. On the outside, a thief accumulates possessions that can be fenced, the money then used to support a higher lifestyle. But in prison there isn’t much difference in lifestyle between the rich and poor. All wear the same uniform and have the same recreational and entertainment options. One can’t get a car or a better apartment. Such options don’t exist in prison. New furniture or wardrobe? The same.

There’s another factor that limits motivation to steal in prison. Prisons are segregated by sex. Male prisons predominate since over 90 percent of prisoners in America are men. In such places, there are no women that men seek to impress by accumulating possessions. Call it male liberation, albeit forced upon them. In the free world, men often use their ill-gotten money and material items to attract women. In a society where men are still expected to be the providers of entertainment and to cover other expenses in the seduction process, the cost can be high. It also depends on the caliber of women being sought. In the case of Jackie Kennedy, when Greek tycoon Aristotle Onassis sought her for his marriage bed, he had to come up with several million dollars.

This is not intended to be a criticism of women. If anything, our culture is responsible for it. Even in an age when women often make more than men, the tradition of men shouldering the financial cost of dating persists. Does this explain the higher number of men in prison? It’s one of the factors.

Once incarcerated, there is no one to impress. There are only prisoners of the same sex relating to each other. Sex stereotypes still may exist when effeminate inmates are in their midst, but that doesn’t lead to the same degree of role playing that takes place on the outside. Gay sex, for the most part consensual, is generally engaged in among equals in and out of prison. More extensive in prison because of the unavailability of the opposite sex, it’s usually situational homosexuality. For many men it’s satisfying since the cultural baggage of one partner being the financial giver and the other the taker doesn’t exist. As a result, the need to rob Peter to pay Paula is nonexistent.
Also, motivation for committing murder or an assault in prison to enforce a business deal where a party reneged is rare. Let’s follow one business prone prisoner from the outside to the inside to understand why he was no longer motivated to continue his violent ways. At least until he got back on the outside.

Robbie had lived in a neighborhood where there were plenty of liquor stores but no drug store. But there were numerous drug sellers. The better cars and nicer apartment furnishings in the area were theirs due to their enterprising spirit. They brought money into the community because affluent people from “better” sections of the city and the suburbs came there to purchase drugs.

If not for their illegal wares, these drug merchants would probably have been praised by the community. After all, the owners of the liquor stores were mostly outsiders. When they sold their legal but arguably no less harmful products, the buyers were local residents. The money these residents paid for booze departed the community, further impoverishing it. No wonder that the drug merchants who caused the opposite to happen were often looked upon as heroes. Young people like Robbie growing up in such a community were particularly impressed by them. They had nice clothes, flashy cars, and fine women. And like the heroes on TV and in the movies, they also had guns.

The only downside to their existence was its tenuousness. Retirement occurred at an early age due to police intervention. Since the business of these merchants was not legal, it was subject to closure by the police at any time. Most drug merchants went to prison while they were still in their twenties. Others died at the hands of those who wanted their money, their merchandise or their market. An illegal drug business is ripe for such predators. Here’s where the heroic side of their image comes into play. To beat the bad guys who would take their cash or their customers, they have to be tougher than them. They have to assume that the predators will be armed to the teeth. For protection, they need the same level of firepower, if not more. And a finger always ready to pull the trigger even when there might be room for alternative action. Better safe than sorry; better to kill than be killed.

With so many police in the community seeking to entrap, compromise or otherwise apprehend drug dealers, one would think that there would be a measure of safety there. But that isn’t the case. Unfortunately, the image that police have in such an area—whether justified or not—is that they are worse than useless.

Picture yourself selling something on a street corner when someone snatches it from you and takes off running. You see a police
car and wave it down, asking for help to catch the thief. The police will want to know what was stolen from you. When you tell them, they will make an arrest, but not of the robber. The cops will arrest you. They will be too busy doing that to even try to catch the thief. And if for some reason he is caught, his punishment will likely be less than yours.

A drug dealer must rely on himself to enforce honesty in those with whom he comes in contact. The same goes for business ethics. If a supplier proves to be dishonest, the drug merchant doesn’t have many choices in what to do. He can’t sue the suppliers since no court of law will entertain such a case. The police will be called to take action against the person who sues. Courts are always anxious to clear their caseloads. What better way to do it than cart away the person who brought a legal action?

Robbie had an understanding of all this while growing up. It made the drug merchants he saw seem like action figures of the first order. Not only did they have to finance their own operations, but they had to protect them. Other than guns and violence, there was no way. It was a dangerous career path but an exciting one. And it was lucrative. Anyone could see that by the money being made and the things that the merchants were buying. Robbie imagined them having huge savings accounts, perhaps equal to what Bill Gates had. He didn’t know that most drug merchants have little beyond their cars, clothes and female companions. These businessmen don’t save much because they know that their businesses might not survive long and that they themselves might not outlast them. Besides, any savings can be confiscated and used against them by prosecutors as evidence of their illegal gains. Better to spend everything one makes.

Still there was an attraction for youngsters like Robbie to follow in their footsteps. The alternative was sticking with school, which wasn’t thrilling. Even there violence existed as students emulated their elders. If you were going to take a chance being someplace where you could get hurt, you might as well as get paid well for it. Nobody lives forever. And few people live as well as the drug merchants in a neighborhood known for poverty and unemployment.

Jobs that carry high risks have long held an appeal for young men. During the First World War, pilots fighting in combat in the newly introduced aircraft were dying in droves. Their life expectancy was measured in weeks and months rather than years. They weren’t even equipped with parachutes. But there was no shortage of men applying to become pilots. The attraction of living well though dying young was strong. The job could be a once in a lifetime chance to do
something significant and dramatic, albeit dangerous. War creates such opportunities. Just as the drug war does.

In Robbie’s neighborhood, some of the money pouring into the community, thanks to the drug trade, found its way directly into his pocket. He ran errands for the merchants, such as fetching coffee. They tipped well. All the while he was observing and learning the ropes. He also saw some of the violence and the bodies being hauled away. It didn’t turn him off to the trade because it was what he expected. Knowing that the merchant-warriors were armed, he reasoned that violence and death were inevitable. That’s what you expect in any war. It would not deter him from becoming a soldier in it, just as risk for one’s life doesn’t discourage volunteers from enlisting in the Army. The United States no longer has the need for a draft even in wartime. Young men seeking adventure and a steady paycheck readily sign up for combat.

Becoming a participant in the drug war provides more than adventure. It is extremely lucrative, even as one starts off as the mercenary or “soldier” of a merchant. Such a combatant is paid well, paid daily, and paid in cash. It’s combat pay and, even in the absence of GI health care and educational reimbursement, it’s very generous. Another advantage of wartime soldiering is that there are good advancement opportunities. They come about in a number of ways. First, it happens through recognition that’s possible for demonstrating bravery and good decision-making under fire. Heroes aren’t created in peacetime, only in the heat of battle. Also leading to advancement are openings that come when combat leaders die or are captured and become prisoners of war.

Robbie, a smart and brave boy, moved up rapidly. By the age of 20, he had his own operation. He saw plenty of action, both of the financial and gun playing kind. During his two years on active duty, he never had to kill anyone. But he came close. Once he caught a thief who had found his stash. Robbie chased him and pinned him to the ground. It turned out to be the same guy who had attempted to steal from him before. What could Robbie do to prevent it from happening again? He couldn’t put the man in jail for a cooling off period. So he decided to kill him, his mood at the moment unforgiving.

Then something happened that Robbie later regarded as a miracle. His gun jammed, so that the murder could not go forward. Shortly thereafter, Robbie was busted on a drug charge and was sent to prison. He told friends he made there how lucky he was. “I could have killed somebody. I could have taken a life when it wasn’t necessary.”
Although he continued to sell drugs in prison, he never came close to fatally injuring another person there. The motivation to commit serious harm on the inside doesn’t exist. For one thing, there is a strong presence of officers. Unlike cops on the outside who often solicit crime so they can entrap people, prison officers are focused on preventing violence. They are peace officers in the truest sense of the word. Their priority is saving life and preventing injury, not racking up statistics on how many people they can collar, dangerous or not.

It’s not the outside cops fault since police departments are run by politicians. The more people a political leader locks up, the harder he or she seems on crime. Prison officers don’t even engage in undercover operations. If they are on duty, they proudly and conspicuously wear their uniform. There’s no guessing of who the police are in prison. You know them on sight, just as you know what their function is. Is it any wonder that prisons are safer than cities given the primary duty of cops there to protect?

It doesn’t mean they ignore prison rules, including the prohibition of drugs. But enforcement is done sensibly, never losing sight of the cop’s role of safeguarding everyone, drug users and nonusers alike. Unlike the outside, never is a prisoner charged with a drug crime based on the word of an informer. A search may be undertaken of the inmate’s belongings based on a tip, but unless an illegal substance is found there, no further action is pursued. This has an important two-fold result for inmate safety. Officers do not waste time looking into past rule infractions or relatively harmless ones. They are there to prevent people from hurting each other. In prison there is less motivation for a drug merchant to kill informants since the damage they can do is very limited.

There’s another reason for the low murder rate in prison. There aren’t any guns there. Of course inmates can have them smuggled in if they wish, just as they can drugs, cigarettes and other contraband. But there’s no need. The officers do not carry guns. As the gunless police force in Great Britain knows, if you give guns to cops, some citizens will feel compelled to have them as well. After all, police are human beings who can make mistakes. Allowing them to be the only ones with deadly firepower is an encouragement for them to become tyrants, or to support tyrants. Confiscating guns of citizens and putting them in the hands of loyal police is one of the first acts of dictators.

With a strong uniformed police presence in prison and no guns needed for self defense or the enforcement of business agreements, violence is low and usually non-lethal. In making this discovery, Robbie, while continuing his drug trade there, felt he
would likely survive his prison stay. That’s when he came to see that the outside war was over for him, at least temporarily. He was now a POW and would make the best of his time until release.

Outsiders often have inaccurate views of prison. On the one hand they have movie myths in their minds. Through the Hollywood lens, prisons are seen as being full of mayhem and treachery with ample doses of sexual assault. The fact is that when violence occurs in prison, it is usually a fist-fight or wrestling match, and almost always non-lethal; and when sex takes place it is even less traumatic in all but the rarest cases. There are enough horny men available so no one has to be forced. In my 10 years in prison at some of the highest security places, I never saw or heard of a sexual assault. Not one. But I came across many liars in prison who would say anything to get attention or special consideration. I became one of them myself when I faked an illness that I knew would get me off an unwanted work detail.

It happened at FCI Petersburg when I was assigned to an undesirable food handling job. New men were given duties that others didn’t want. Established inmates had contacts to pull strings, but not me. I knew I could make such contacts but I needed time. The first day I reported for kitchen work I told the staffer in charge that I was recovering from hepatitis. It was a lie, and he suspected it to be, but he couldn’t take a chance. He ordered me to get tested and to come back after the prison clinic cleared me. That took two weeks to accomplish. By then I had made contacts among sympathetic staff and influential inmates to get the do-nothing job I wanted.

Film depictions of prison rarely go into the politics of their operations. If they did, it would not make for lively entertainment. Who wants to sit through two hours of gesticulating inmates jockeying for special privileges and minor amenities? Perhaps if the sexual component were included, a film would make for an explicitly entertaining and educational gay movie. Even so, it wouldn’t have a lot of class or variety. Prison surroundings are drab and the copulators unimaginative, often first-time experimenters. At least such a film would destroy the myth of extensive rape in prison.

While outsiders who think that prisons are exceptionally dangerous places are in the dark, those who take the opposite view are equally incorrect. Just because there’s little physical hardship doesn’t mean there isn’t enormous psychological strain.

The statement is often made by prisoners who tout their toughness that, “You can cage my body but you can never capture my mind.” In fact there is little caging in prison. Inmates assigned to cells are out of them most of the time. They are on work details,
usually of their own choosing and almost always very light. Or they are engaged in recreation. Or participating in activities in a prison school, library, chapel, cafeteria or elsewhere.

Prison work details vary. They cannot be accurately described as jobs because they don’t come close to requiring the time or energy of conventional employment. Because wardens are under political pressure to make sure that everyone works, all kinds of “jobs” are created. If prisons are inventive at all, here is the area where creativity shines.

A newly arriving inmate asks seasoned prisoners about the different work details in the prison. Few work details will involve much effort; just avoid the kitchen or the laundry where there is real work to do. But even there, attractions exist. In food service, you can cook gourmet meals for yourself and your friends. It’s the equivalent of operating your own restaurant, take-out and catering business. You can make money in prison doing this, and of course eat well. You’ll still have to cook for the chow hall, but once you get the bland and basic institutional fare out of the way, you’re on your own. Other inmates will help you. It’s not unusual to hear a prisoner returning from work in the kitchen announcing all the delicacies in his possession available to his cellblock or dorm mates. The kitchen also prepares food for the staff dining room. Whatever they eat—from shrimp to steak—is available to inmates who work there and to their friends. Since there’s no cash in prison, it’s all done by bartering. What an inmate has gotten or will get from the canteen will be traded for the special food he either ordered or is being suddenly offered by kitchen workers.

Another opportunity to prosper in a prison job involves working in the laundry. Inmates there have access to the best uniforms, jackets, shoes and more. For prisoners who want to look fashionable—within the constraints of prison garb—it’s a virtual haberdashery. There’s even tailoring so that clothing can be altered to fit. Get yourself assigned to the laundry and you can do well for yourself, bartering clothing services for the best food and anything from the canteen.

There are two other categories of jobs for inmates who really want to work. One is in prison industries, such as Unicor in federal prisons and Pride in Florida state prison. A prison industry manufactures items that are purchased by government agencies, such as office furniture, printing and of course that old standard, license plates. Because of the influence of labor unions that don’t want cheap prison labor to compete with free world workers, laws restrict what prison industries can offer. For the most part, they can make items
only for government agencies to purchase. Still, there is controversy and a perennial movement to make prison labor laws more restrictive, or to eliminate prison industries altogether. Supporters of prison industries say that they are a good rehabilitative tool. They point out that there is lower recidivism among such workers when they leave prison. But this is misleading since prison industry workers are the cream of inmates. Not only are they the ones who want to work, but they are hand selected by managers from among the prison pool. Payment can be as much as a dollar or more per hour, not bad since there are no living expenses for inmate workers.

Another option for real work at better than pennies per hour exists in private enterprises that have set up operations in some prisons. There aren’t many but a few prisons have them. These manufacturing and service businesses range from airline reservation phone banks to limousine conversion shops to clothing manufacturers. They sell to the general public and have been accepted by labor unions because they pay “prevailing wages” for equivalent work on the outside. As a result, the pay can be high, as much as $10 or more per hour. But the inmates don’t get to keep much of it. A large portion goes to the prison for room and board, and another substantial amount goes into a victim fund, whether or not the prisoner actually had any victims. Of the amount remaining, most of it is put into a savings account that the inmate gets on release. The small balance goes to the inmate to spend at the canteen or for mail-order books.

Even such “real work” in prison is not necessarily difficult. During a year I spent working in a Unicor printing plant where we churned out government reports, the 80 or so men there were mostly idle. The general manager, who made almost a hundred thousand a year in his government position, was incompetent. He ordered incorrect paper, created poor production schedules and failed to motivate and properly train staff. When the inmate workers saw him scurrying around the plant trying to fix problems he had created, we nicknamed this slight, sometimes verbally abusive man “the squirrel.” Still, our pay was good, and for little work. Plus we had a chance to get our own writing copied and printed. I slipped a small book I’d written into a production run. It included an attractive cover, binder and my own notice indicating that I was the owner of the copyright. The manager didn’t see it, or he didn’t care. When he wasn’t flustered with problems in the plant—such as having to dispose of stacks of improperly printed government reports—he sedately sat in his office surfing the Internet. The lingering odor of marijuana there indicated that surfing wasn’t all he was doing.
It was government work at its worst. Unlike outside government operations where there is some degree of accountability, this evaporated in prison. Just as prisons keep inmates from getting out, they also prevent the noisy public and their political representatives from getting in. You couldn’t ask for a better formula for waste and idleness. Though I was rarely idle. Assigned to the plant’s office, I spent most of my time doing personal projects with the old but adequate computer that sat on my desk.

A friend of mine who worked at a Pride factory in a Florida state prison had a telephone on his desk. While he couldn’t make outgoing calls, he fielded incoming ones. A female customer struck up a romantic friendship with him and called him often. There was little else for him to do but talk to her until his next call came in. In another part of the same factory—shipping and receiving—inmates were also taking advantage of the lax oversight. Some were mailing goods stolen from the factory to outside contacts. In exchange, drugs were mailed to them, hidden inside incoming packages which they opened at the factory.

We’re talking about the same inmates that the general public perceives as going through hell as they sit in their barren cells day and night. Such cell sitting is rare.

It’s true that most prisoners don’t have jobs where they can cause much mischief, but those are not real jobs in any sense of the word. An inmate might get assigned to a painting squad. He’ll spend most of his days sitting around a paint shop with 20 other inmates in the same squad. A staffer assigned to supervise them will rest in a glass enclosed office, often fast asleep. One or two days each month for a few hours each day, the men and their supervisor will venture out on the compound to paint something. Perhaps a room or a hallway. Requests for their services are rare. There are just too many inmates in the squad to do a good job. They aren’t motivated and they receive little or no pay their efforts. Plus they’re not anxious to improve the appearance of the prison, particularly staff offices. A common expression used after viewing a wall that’s been sloppily covered by them, “Not bad for government work.”

Job assignments aren’t the only thing to take inmates out of their housing quarters for most of the day. There are educational programs that all prisons offer. Mention a vocation and there’s a prison somewhere offering training in it. If an inmate wants a certain type of training not offered by his or her prison, a request can be made for a transfer to a prison providing it. Once, there was a wide array of academic classes—from biology to accounting—but these have largely been eliminated. Wiping them out came as a result of
politicians’ get-tough-on-prisoners policy. It started when prisoners were eliminated from a government-funded program that allowed colleges and universities to be reimbursed for the cost of providing books and professors inside prisons. What remained were classes to earn a GED high school diploma and vocational training.

Prisoners who sign up for a GED or vocational program are exempted from even the most minor prison jobs. Attending these classes is a good way to pass the time. Sitting in a sunny classroom is more pleasant than hanging around a smelly paint shop, even after you get used to sleeping in such a place. The classes are normally not well monitored, and for good reason. Some of the teachers are fearful of pushing the inmates too far. Others are compassionate and don’t want to cause prisoners more stress than they already have. Let them come and sit in the classrooms for as long as they like. If they’re not disruptive, why rock the boat by challenging them to learn? Here is the same type of thinking by teachers in many inner city schools. This is not necessarily a criticism of either since the barriers they face are great. In both settings, you’re dealing with severely bruised students.

Sometimes an inmate can sit in a prison school for years before getting his GED, if he ever gets it. There are far less pleasant ways to spend one’s time in prison. School is a good place to write letters home, read novels, and make contacts with inmates in sections of the prison that one would not normally encounter; a place to meet old friends and co-defendants. That happens when they sign up for school too.

Come the evenings and weekends and there’s more to do. Spending time in the library, chapel or recreation yard are among the choices. Any of them offers a diversion. A library has books, of course. But there’s more there. CDs and DVDs are often among the offerings. Like the books, they usually come from donated sources, so the choices are limited. In some prisons where there is money budgeted for library acquisitions, there are materials on hand highly relevant to inmates. These include books about prison escapes and movies that deal with the tyranny of political leaders such as Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and others.

Libraries in prison serve a function beyond a place to read books and view movies. They are social gathering places for inmates. They resemble a typical community library. In appearance, they could even pass for a small branch library. The stacks are well maintained by the inmates assigned to work there. The interior tends to be clean and well lit. The only downside is that they can get crowded. But even that can be an advantage in that conversation and
exchange of bartered items can be made by inmates without close observation by officers who might look in.

Part of the pleasantness of the prison libraries is that they are almost always air conditioned, even in prisons where such is a rarity. It’s hard to believe that prisons in the deep South, including many of the newest ones, lack this modern convenience. But it’s true. As a result, the quality and temperature of the air can be brutal. Keep in mind that you’re dealing with buildings that are crammed with people, where windows are small and rarely open. There are air vents but the air pushed through them is often as hot as the air already in the cells. When a prisoner can’t step outside to cool off at night, it amounts to near torture.

In one prison that made the news, a vocational training program was discontinued during the summer because of the heat. It was a program that taught prisoners to train seeing eye dogs for the blind. The dogs used in the program were affected by the heat. Word reached the ASPCA about the plight of the canines. As a result, the animal protection group declared the place unfit for dogs. The inmates left behind lamented that there wasn’t an equivalent organization for two-legged animals called the ASPCH: American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Humans.

Before the nighttime count, often at 9pm, inmates can escape the heat in the coolness of the library before returning to their housing quarters. On those evenings, it’s less important what one does in the library than to get there to cool off. On weekend nights when the library is closed, the only option for reducing one’s body heat is to take frequent cold showers. I remember taking five of them in the course of a day. Once you cool off your body—or in the winter heat it up with hot showers—it takes about two hours for the surrounding air temperature to penetrate you. Utilizing cold showers during heat waves is not just a matter of being comfortable. It helps avoid heat strokes.

The ambiance of a prison library is set by the staff person who is there to oversee it. I’ll describe the librarians in four prisons where I lived for at least a year during my 10-year prison odyssey.

The librarian at Lorton Reformatory, Washington, DC’s now closed prison located about 15 miles from downtown, DC, was a most amiable man. Put him in a prison uniform and he would blend in with inmates. He talked, looked and acted like most of us; which was a good thing. It allowed him to relate, to communicate. There wasn’t much that inmates could put over on this perceptive man.

To say he was well liked would be an understatement. The men revered him. He was the father that many of them never had. He
gave them advice, motivated them, placed books in their hands to read. When the men received letters from home, they put them on his desk. Then it was his turn to do the reading. After absorbing each letter, hopeful words would come from his mouth. There was no such thing as a bad letter from home in his opinion. Even when the news was bad, there was a silver lining. "At least you haven't been forgotten," he would say. "Your family's attitude and situation may leave something to be desired, but at least they're alive. And where there's life, there's hope." You rarely found this worldly librarian failing to listen and respond to anyone who sought his advice. There was a chair next to his desk at all times. Inmates took turns sitting in it, and no one was ever rushed out of it.

His standard means of connecting: "If I hadn't gotten a good paying job in the government when I was young, I'm sure I'd be sitting exactly where you're sitting now. In fact, I might still end up there if I ever lose this job." It wasn't idle talk since news had come of the possibility of closing down Lorton. I don't know what became of this man when that happened. Did he embark on a life of crime to make up for lost income? One thing I can say for certain: if he is engaged in crime and you run into him on the street, you have nothing to fear. He would never do anything to harm someone. His offense would strictly be of the victimless kind. He told us so.

If a movie were made about this engaging and charismatic figure, he could play himself. He had a natural way of being lively and colorful. When I met another prison librarian a thousand miles away at Hamilton Correctional Institution in Florida, I was reminded of that Lorton stalwart. The Hamilton librarian had the opposite qualities. The Lorton man treated prisoners as peers and spoke respectfully to them. The Hamilton librarian treated us as if we were devils sent to hell. Her role: to be Satan's helper and keep the fires beneath us hot. Her behavior was so extreme that it was often comical. In short, she was a character. Picture a melodramatic silent movie with a villain in it. She was that villain. Or the bad witch in the Wizard of Oz, with additional poundage. This viperous librarian provided enough entertainment to be her own sideshow in a circus.

She insisted that the library be quiet at all times, even when packed with inmates. In maintaining this rule, she did not set a good example. She didn't just talk loudly but often yelled. It didn't take much to set her off. An inmate might be slouching in a chair or he didn't put a book back on the shelf neatly. "This isn't a barnyard!" she'd scream at the offender. "It's a library!" No question that she ran a tight ship; much more so than was necessary. Always assuming
the worst in prisoners, she went out of her way to criticize and
denigrate us.

Each day the prison library opened at 9 am sharp. By then,
there were a half dozen or so inmates waiting to get in. A bureaucrat
of the first order, she timed the opening to the second. She had a
ritual for the men to follow while they waited. A white line had been
painted about 20 feet from the door of the library. Behind this line
the men had to wait. No one ever asked her the reason for this line.
Why invite further abuse by inquiring? The only thing I could think
of was that she didn’t want the front door crowded when she arrived
to work in the morning. Bad enough that she had to be in close
proximity to us devils all day long. She intended to keep us away as
she prepared to open the door.

One morning we stood behind the line with a threatening sky
above us. We hoped that the rain would not come before the 9 am
opening. You don’t get umbrellas in prison; presumably they can be
used as weapons. The hour came and the librarian pecked out from
her slightly opened door. She then looked upward and seemed
disappointed that the rain had not yet begun. We inched forward.
Then came the torrent. Not the rain but her harsh words. “Not so fast,
inmates! I didn’t give the signal to come in yet!” We suddenly
realized she hadn’t. We had failed to play the game by her ridiculous
rules, and we were now all in trouble.

“Behind the line!” she yelled. In our haste to avoid the bad
weather we had started toward the entrance before she had sullenly
waved her hand for us to come in, as she did each morning. Like a
high priestess sending a message to her obedient congregants, she
took pleasure in the act. She was like a dog trainer using a hand
gesture to get her animals to perform in unison. We had failed to
obey and were now in trouble.

But being in trouble in prison does not mean great hardship.
There’s no corporal punishment and you can’t be denied a bed to
sleep in, or three meals daily to eat. You might be prevented from
making calls home for awhile, but that’s about it. You can’t be
denied sending or receiving letters. They’re part of your constitutional
guarantees. Here’s one reason why wardens don’t want to remove
TVs and other entertainment options from prison. These “extras” are
the only things that can be denied to prisoners who fail to obey the
rules.

Of course if the violation is severe enough—such as punching
an officer—new criminal charges can be brought against an inmate.
But this isn’t an easy thing to do. Even if a prosecution is successful,
what will be the deterrent result for prisoners? More jail time? It’s
hardly a punishment to give someone something he’s already used to. What can you do to lifers? The answer is not much. In view of this, it’s no wonder that prisons are run mostly by inmates who do largely what they wish.

Prosecutions aren’t easy because whoever is prosecuted has a right to put on a defense. Jurors often side with prisoners when they hear about the life-threatening conditions and daily beatings that guards inflict on them. It isn’t true, but it’s what jurors will hear. Defense attorneys are as wily and manipulative as prosecutors. They will not only present the myths that prisons are dangerous, but will build on them.

Prisoners may not have much in terms of material possessions. But they have their health and their minds. They also have a lot of friends, an inevitable and unexpectedly pleasant consequence of the prison experience. That’s not to say that most people aren’t miserable being in prison. But misery loves company, and friends on the inside are in abundance. If one of them is put on trial for assault against an officer, the others will all come forward to testify on his behalf. And they will say whatever it takes to convince a jury that the defendant hit the prison officer in self-defense. Then paint a broader picture of prison being full of violently sadistic “guards.” There’s no reason for inmates not to lie. They get a free trip out of prison to the courthouse to testify. And no retaliation can be brought against them for testifying. That’s one good thing about courts in America; you can speak your mind. A person can even libel and slander someone on the stand and no defamation action can be brought. It’s called witness immunity.

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We knew we were in trouble as we stood behind the white demarcation line when the librarian yelled at us. I didn’t like the prospect of what our punishment would be. The Hamilton librarian didn’t have many choices of what to do with us. Our act of crossing the line did not rise to the level of “writing us up” in a disciplinary report, which could result in time in the hole. Even if it had, she would have preferred to inflict more immediate harm. She therefore slammed the door shut and left us outside waiting.

The wait wouldn’t be long, we knew, but then neither would the rain in coming. She had to open quickly or she’d be in violation of rules. The delay was an attempt to sweat us out, or more precisely, rain us out. We saw her look out the window at the sky with disappointment that it had not yet opened. Why was God favoring
these fallen angels turned devils? The wait finally ended and she opened the door. But before she could give her all-important signal, the unexpected happened. The inmate at the front of the line stumbled over the white marking. His face was full of amazement. He hadn’t expected to do what he did. The act wasn’t voluntary; he had been pushed by a mischievous inmate behind him.

The prank proved contagious and we all burst out laughing. Her reaction was to scowl, then give another tirade. “What do you inmates think you’re doing? You’re in prison and you need to act like it! You’re here to be punished, not to have a good time!”

Says who? Not the U.S. Supreme Court which in a landmark case about prison abuse declared, “People go to prison as punishment, not to be punished.” The high court stated that it’s up to judges to punish by jailing people, not the domain of prison bureaucrats whose role is to help inmates get through the experience, and make sure they don’t leave before their sentence is up. The acerbic but ultimately comical librarian had apparently not read that decision.

Though perhaps her civilian assistant had. This was the only prison library I came across that had too many librarians. One is more than enough since inmates are usually assigned to prison libraries to help as their work detail. They perform the necessary tasks of checking books in and out and cataloging new ones. Unnecessary functions, such as befriending inmates in Lorton or befuddling them in Hamilton, are handled by the librarians. What did the woman’s assistant do? Not much. He usually followed the librarian around, looking meek and ineptly handling small tasks. The man never yelled. In fact, he rarely opened his mouth. We speculated that he probably couldn’t get a job anywhere else, that a politician had put him there to do the man’s family a favor.

The only excitement he generated was the day he was rushed to a hospital amid speculation that an inmate had hit him. It looked that way to observers since he had dropped to the floor as he stood by the door of the library at closing time as inmates filtered out. Had one of them fatally stabbed him? Aside from the rarity of prison knife attacks, and that such wounds are usually superficial, why would anyone kill this inert individual? To do so would be redundant. We wondered if he would come back to his job, whether or not he had been hurt seriously. Clearly prison did not agree with him.

But he showed up the very next day as his identical lethargic self. The truth was revealed by one of the inmates assigned to the library. “When the medics came, they knew what was up. Still they took him to the hospital to make sure he didn’t break anything in the
fall. They knew what happened when they smelled booze on his breath. The guy’s a fall-down drunk!”

Where else can such a person be employed? Here was the perfect place for him to “earn” a paycheck and hide his condition. He was hibernating from the world of genuine work.

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Further north, in the library at FCI Petersburg in Virginia, a different woman held forth. Another harmless character, she could have passed as a cross between a new age guru and a streetwalker. She spoke like the former and dressed like the latter. Her looks were stunning, her makeup flawless, her movements painful to watch for us sex-deprived men; poetry in erotic motion. Inmates went to the library to have a glance at this woman, take in her perfume, and perhaps be favored with a word or smile. It was a sad admission of how love starved we were. Imagine 1,000 guys sharing the same girlfriend, and accepting it gleefully! I’m sure that psychologists have a term for such a sick state of mind. Fortunately, there were no mirrors in the prison, a common absence since glass can be broken and become a danger. Had there been mirrors I think the men suffering from this mass mania would have had difficulty looking themselves in the eyes. I know I would have.

The well-educated woman was as smart as she was beautiful. She knew the affect she had on men and how to handle it. Acting like a glamorous movie star who had decided to run for public office, she put herself on display, spoke when spoken to, and was quiet when silence was more effective. Long ago she had figured out that a male prison was one of the safest places for an attractive show-off like her to work. There might have been a few dangerous ones in the mix, but they were greatly outnumbered by the others. How does that differ from the outside? Quite a bit. If a woman is being brutalized in the free world, people who might be aware of it will normally not get involved. They will call the police but then it might be too late. For such onlookers, the woman is merely a stranger. Plus, they often think that she might have brought the ordeal on herself. They could also be fearful. The attacker might turn out to be violent to them.

In prison, none of these reservations apply. If any inmates had seen her assaulted, they would have jumped into the fray without reservation. After all, she was their girlfriend, irreplaceable in more than one sense. Just as love is blind, so is fear when a loved one is threatened. The attacker might be dangerous, but so is everyone in prison, at least potentially. It comes with the territory.
Still the goddess librarian knew enough to avoid being with an inmate where she might be cornered. She usually made sure there were several prisoners in her presence. That happened naturally as no man wanted to be left out. Who could tell when she might dismiss the others and ask a lucky inmate to remain? But you needed to be there for that to happen. For her part, she'd dismiss everyone at once, leading them all to an exit. They followed obediently, as if she were beckoning. Instead of waving at them with her hand, she used the wiggle of her rear, always tightly encased in a snug dress or undersized pants.

The inevitable finally happened. She got pregnant. Men stayed up into the early hours of mornings speculating on who the father might be. I remember Ben's crestfallen comment: "Poor kid! How will it ever know who the father is?" Everyone seemed embarrassed over this prospect except the librarian herself. She continued in her job as if nothing had happened, even as her stomach grew. Did she know something we didn't? Was there a possibility that she had been impregnated by none other than her own husband?

He was senior-rank officer working in the same prison. We liked him almost as much as her, though in a different way. They had similar traits: pleasant, hardworking, good-looking and professional. We rarely saw them together, which was a sign of their admirable independence and professionalism. But when they did cross paths, we could see how devoted they were to each other.

What kind of library did she operate? Though I was there often, I didn't pay much attention to the books. Before you think ill of me for being overly fixated on this female, I will explain.

I received many books mailed to me from the outside. They were superior to the ones in the library because they were newer. Yet there was something in the library that attracted me there besides my girlfriend. It was a bank of typewriters on a long counter for inmates to use, available on a first-come, first-serve basis. A prisoner who wanted to use one went to the inmate clerk on duty and presented his picture ID issued by the prison. It boldly stated one's status as a federal inmate, name and, most prominently featured on the card, prisoner number. The final feature, almost as an afterthought in a corner, was a photo taken of the inmate upon entry to the prison. Most men are seen smiling. You'd understand why if you shared their experience of arriving at FCI Petersburg after sitting for weeks or months in a jail. The prison is spacious compared to a cramped jail, and there are food choices—including a salad bar—as well as activity choices not available in a jail.
Presenting an ID to the inmate library clerk, the prisoner seeking to use a typewriter is given a ink ribbon cartridge. Put it in the typewriter and you’re in business. Except you aren’t supposed to use the typewriter for business, legitimate or otherwise. They were reserved for inmates who are preparing legal papers of one sort or another. A sign above the typewriters says so: “For Legal Work Only.”

Prisoners are always preparing legal papers, some frivolous and some beyond frivolous to the point of being absurd. It’s an occupational hazard of being an inmate. Very few prisoners ever give up reinventing or retrying their cases. They prepare and mail court filings that never get anywhere, almost always producing cold responses from judges. But the one in a thousand that succeeds is worth the effort. Even if success means that only a day is shaved off one’s sentence, it’s a victory and goes a long way in adding to an inmate’s self-image. Instead of being looked upon as a loser day after day and year after year, the prisoner momentarily enjoys the spotlight as a winner. The effort itself is good therapy for inmates. Like the millions of free-worlders who play the lottery despite overwhelming odds against winning, hope runs eternal. If you don’t play you can’t win; if you don’t file legal papers, you can’t leave early.

By the time I reached FCI Petersburg in the sixth year of my sentence—the federal phase after finishing my Florida state time—I was through playing. Shortly after I arrived with my trial transcripts in tow, I tossed them out. I was already wearing a prison uniform. Why burden myself further by wearing an albatross around my neck? Too bad that the trial transcripts had been provided to me in the first place. Better that the tree from which all that paper came had lived. I was now ready to get serious about my music and writing. That’s why the transcripts had to go.

One day while preparing a work of fiction using a typewriter under the “For Legal Work Only” sign, I was approached by the pretty and still very pregnant librarian. “What are you typing Sobin?” I wasn’t startled by her standing behind me. Like her other lovers I knew where she was at every moment. Even when she was away from the prison I knew. My mind’s eye told me she spent all her free time dressing, undressing, showering, soaking in a bubble bath and otherwise pampering her astounding body for my enjoyment.

I also knew she was behind me by the way she called my name. Typically in prison, a staffer addresses inmates as “mister” before giving their last name. They say that it’s a way of showing respect, but that’s bullshit. In fact it’s a way of maintaining distance.
An officer couldn’t very well work on death row and announce to an inmate “Get ready Jimmy, we’re going to kill you today.”

The librarian used last names only, and we loved it. In a sense she was being more personal with us than the few kindly staffs who used our first names. She reminded me of the woman who might playfully call her boyfriend tiger or bear. The appellation is not conveyed with any malice. The librarian could have called us shitheads and we would have reacted with a smile. Which is how I responded when she questioned me about the use of a typewriter for my non-legal work. “I’m preparing a short story for publication,” I answered. Her pleasant but professional tone did not change: “But these typewriters are only for legal work.”

Like entertaining a girlfriend, an inmate should never challenge a staffer unless he’s prepared to go all the way. I presented a copy of a little known regulation to this woman that applied to all BOP (Bureau of Prisons) prisoners. It said that inmates are not to be obstructed in the preparation of manuscripts for publication. I came across the regulation once during my early days of jailhouse lawyering. I figured I’d save it should I ever find myself in a situation where I needed it.

Taking this prison regulation from my hand, she read it. I was not surprised that she hadn’t seen it before since there are so many regulations on the books; pages and pages of them in small print. Who else but an inmate would have time to read them all? The regulation I now relied upon regarding a staffer not standing in the way of inmate writers came about because someone probably once threw an offending manuscript away. Then a group like the ACLU dragged the dazed employee and his or her warden into court to raise hell. Making accusations with abandon. What totalitarian country did they think they were living in? Didn’t these prison bozos know that the First Amendment of the United States Constitution applies to inmates as it does to all US citizens?

She asked me dutifully, “What does preparing a manuscript have to do with typing it?” I explained with the authority of an incarcerated Charles Dickens, “When you submit a manuscript for publication, it has to be typed. Otherwise, no magazine editor will look at it.” Like a small lover’s spat in public, we were attracting the attention of others. To my regret, she then decided to leave me alone and allow me to bask in my victory. Had she put up more of a fight, the conquest would have been more satisfying.

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Returning to Florida, this time to Cross City Correctional Institution, I’ll conclude with my fourth librarian of significance. Like the others, he was in a class by himself.

This man aligned himself with inmates in a very concrete way. He had once felt the heavy hand of government and the injustice of undue punishment himself, having been harassed and finally fired from his prison job. It happened not because of anything he did but rather for who he was. Maybe he had expected it, which is why he had bounced back so quickly. After all, being an openly gay man in a small Bible Belt community is bound to get you noticed and targeted.

When the smoke of the courtroom battle cleared, he rode to victory into the sunset. Then he rode right back to reclaim his prison position from which he had been dismissed. Neither he nor the court saw any conflict between his sexual attraction to men and his being an employee in a men’s prison. They were correct. Women who like men are common staffers in men’s prisons. Our pregnant Petersburg librarian was an obvious example.

The librarian at Cross City returned happier and gayer than ever. In flaunting both his sexual orientation and his court victory, he took to wearing the most colorful clothing and accessories. His scarf in winter was made of bright hues, his hat a striking French beret, his shoes and shirt of matching dramatic tones. To add to the outrage of the image he sought to project, the inmate aids he selected to work in the library were as gay, if not as happy, as he was.

As a group, they did an excellent job of running the place. Everything went like clockwork; clockwork orange, pink and powder blue. These were his favorite colors. Even if visiting inmates didn’t recognize the gay character of the staff, they’d detect it in other ways. Movie night at the library featured films with strong gay characters. Books acquired by the library often had gay themes. This is not to say that they were deficient in literary value. Who can argue with the excellence of the gay-authored bestseller *Fried Green Onions*? Still, having six copies of this book in the library seemed odd.

You didn’t have to be gay to be treated well in the Cross City Correctional Institution’s library. If you were an inmate, you were welcomed. I don’t think I’ve ever been to a library in or out of prison so warm and friendly. Not only was it a place to read and relax in the most comfortable library chairs I have ever experienced, but it was a great resource center. The librarian’s primary inmate assistant admired my work in writing prose and playing music. He also admired my hording ability. Whatever I didn’t eat at the chow hall, I took with me. Whatever I found in the electrical shop where I was assigned that wasn’t needed, I would also take. The library aide
would sometimes call on me to supply something for him. In return he was generous with library supplies. Cross City C.I. was the only prison I ever encountered where I could get anything copied at any time; where I could also get enough pens and writing paper to author any length manuscript I sought to create. When the bartering took place between this aide and me, the librarian literally looked the other way.

He only got involved in library matters when his considerable influence was called for. One day he lost one of his inmate workers to the prison camp that was within a stone’s throw of the prison. The camp was a low security prison where inmates were transferred when they got “short.” It usually happened when they were within six months to a year of the completion of their sentence. Most men looked forward to the transition since it meant a step closer to freedom. There were no walls or fences around the camp, and very few officers. Rarely did inmates walk away since they faced an escape charge if they did. It wasn’t worth the risk with so little time left. Better to stick it out rather than chance an additional five years. With head counts conducted day and night, they would be detected soon and wouldn’t get far. Beside the non-prison setting, there were other advantages to being in the camp. Visits from outsiders took place in a more relaxed setting. Searches of one’s person, including strip searches, were far less common than in prison.

But there was a downside too. In the camp, everyone was expected to put in a full day’s work. Real work. Inmates were assigned to the toughest and most mental jobs that local government had to offer. For little or no pay. They became part of a crew to clean streets and public buildings. Warehouse helpers. Truck loaders. Deliverers of institutional food to government facilities. It was slave labor. In fact the head of the Florida Department of Corrections, a black man, admitted it. Behind his desk hung a sign: “Incarceration is slavery by choice.” While the characterization may be far-fetched, like calling Florida’s busy death row killing apparatus “murder by choice, it is a fact that slavery exists for prisoners. Legally so. The amendment to the U.S. Constitution that outlawed slavery in America after the Civil War made an exception for incarcerated men and women. Ironically, on the eve of the Civil War there were four million slaves in the United States, and relatively few prisoners. Today there are two and a half million slaves in the prison system, and growing rapidly. Most of them are black.

In some ways the pre-Civil War slaves had a more humane existence than their counterparts today. They had a conventional sex life, could raise children and live as a family. Even travel to visit
friends and relatives on their days off in other plantations was permissible. These options don’t exist for prisoners.

Not even at work camps. Which is one reason why the Cross City librarian aide who was transferred to the camp hated it. His friends at the main prison heard his complaints. He’d gotten word to them through the prison laundry. The camp, a much smaller enclave than the prison, didn’t have its own laundry. Inmates there put their spare uniforms and other garments in a mesh bag and dropped it in a cart for pick up by the prison laundry. After the washing and drying was done, the laundry bags were returned to the camp. An inmate at the camp who wanted to get word to a buddy at the prison simply dropped a note in the cart. It would be duly and secretly delivered by a prisoner assigned to the laundry when the cart arrived at the prison.

In this way, the Cross City librarian heard about the plight of his former aide. All the departed prisoner dreamed about was going back to the main prison to resume his librarian aide position. Life was too short to be unhappy, even prison life. Couldn’t something be done for him? Being a slave to a nine-to-five job on the outside was bad enough, but to be forced into such employment at the camp with no pay seemed intolerable.

Strings were pulled by the amiable, anti-establishment librarian who was still riding high on his lawsuit victory after the failed attempt to throw him out of prison for being gay. He identified with the aide who also wanted back in. None of this seemed strange to other library aides or inmates at the prison. They knew how pleasant a place the library was. One of them once called it “Noah’s Ark,” adding, “You don’t want to get thrown off.”

The librarian succeeded in re-imprisoning the man. He did it by claiming the inmate was a vital part of his operation, that he filled an “institutional need.” This of course was stretching the point, and not by a little. To say the prisoner was important to the library, which had more aides than duties to assign them, was like saying that a sixth toe on one’s foot is vital to walking.

The truth about prison life is that it’s what you make it. If you want to get hurt physically, you can do it. Make a pest out of yourself, be confrontational with others, and engage in risky behavior like stealing, gambling or using drugs, expect problems. Sooner or later, you’re going to have to fend off some of the enemies you’ll make. But if you keep your cool and mind your own affairs, you’ll pass through prison with relatively little risk. Not only will you find less death and violence there compared to the outside, but very little of the mayhem that does occur will be random. In the free world, maintaining your calm and minding your own business may not be
enough. You still may be targeted by being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Since all of prison is the wrong place that everyone shares, everyone is on common ground. It’s like being in the eye of a hurricane. Stay in that calm spot and avoid the edges and you’ll be alright.

That’s sometimes easier said than done. Particularly early in one’s sentence before learning the ropes. But there’s a good way to envelop yourself in protection. Find a friend in Jesus. Or Allah. Or G-d, as Orthodox Jews spell him or her. There’s a reason why jailhouse religion is popular. It makes sense.

A staffed chapel exists in every prison. With all the time that inmates can spend out of their cellblock or dormitory, it’s a good idea to spend some of it there. Even if they don’t believe in a higher power, the chapel is a place for positive fellowship and generally good vibrations. Why not partake of them? The experience is available nightly, and it’s recommended for everyone who wants to minimize stress.

If you’ve never been to a church, synagogue, or the ultimate in religious enthusiasm, a prison chapel, you’re in for a soothing experience. An other-worldly experience. Which is what you want to accomplish in prison. The further you get away from the prison world, the better off your mind will be. You’ll never find a fight in a chapel, even if you go there looking for one. Harsh words are also rare. No wonder such places are so popular in every prison. Go to the chapel and it’s as good as being in protective custody, without the limitations of movement that such custody entails. Even better, when inmates leave the chapel the glow of good will and self-assurance stays with them. It can carry them for hours in peace and tranquility. The protective shield is important because prisoners learn that the biggest enemy they face in prison is themselves. If they can be at ease, the world around them will not collapse and do them in.

A prisoner I knew named Arnold exemplified religious enthusiasm. He attended worship services at the chapel nightly and never failed to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Or as author and satirist Paul Krassner would say, the Friendly Ghost. Arnold was so excited during the services that he clapped and swayed more than anyone else. In a Southern prison where everyone claps and sways profoundly, that’s saying a lot. Not only did he do these things but he jumped up and down with equal enthusiasm. More timid, or perhaps less touched, inmates looked on in amazement.

One of those inmates who saw Arnold in action was me. We worked together as aides in the education department, laboring side by side; more often sitting side by side reading our favorite books.
The contrast of seeing Arnold as a sedate inmate by day, and a wild man kicking up holy hell by night in the chapel, struck me as a contradiction. Arnold sensed that I was curious and gave me an explanation. “You might think I’m out of control at the chapel, but really I’m not. It’s just my way of letting off steam; of getting rid of all the anxiety and tension I feel. I was in group therapy once, even role playing exercises. But believe me, religion is better. If not for the chapel, I’m sure I’d be a problem here. To myself and others. As long as we have it, I’m going to let myself take advantage of the chapel as much as possible.” Model prisoner by day, mad parishioner by night. That defined Arnold as he passed through his sentence without being a bother to anyone.

Another inmate who clothed himself in the protection of religion was Larry. He got into religion during the early stage of his prison sentence, which was a good thing for him. Usually, when starting out in prison, problems are encountered. That’s when inmates are still getting their sea legs, so to speak. Before the adjustment is complete, chances of getting swept overboard are high. Or getting thrown overboard. In the beginning, especially when prisoners find themselves in the intake prison known as a “reception center,” everyone is jockeying to stay afloat. Inmates can easily get in each other’s way there.

The intake center is the first step in serving a sentence. When inmates arrive they are put through tests and interviews to determine the type and custody level of the prison where they will do their time. They could even be sent to a “psych” prison if mental problems are detected.

Reception centers can be scary places with such a hodgepodge of unevaluated, unclassified prisoners. Fortunately they have active chapels. And that’s where smart, if not necessarily holy, inmates spend their time.

Larry was a regular. That was especially important since he was an easy person to pick on. A fragile individual with several annoying traits. One was over-politeness; another clumsiness. It was inevitable that he’d run into problems. One day while he was on the chow line, he bumped into the wrong person. It was the wrong time on the wrong day to do that. The aggravated, quite muscular prisoner he jostled exploded. “I’m going to strangle you, you puny motherfucker.” How did Larry react? He had the choice of being strong or being timid. Either way he was in danger. The offended prisoner needed to calm down. Had Larry been a typical tensed-up inmate, a fight would have followed. Such an inmate would have
thrown the first punch after hearing the harsh words directed at him and his mother.

But Larry had a different reaction. Whether genuine or not, it’s hard to say. What he uttered seemed sincere in view of his reputation for attending daily chapel services. “You don’t want to kill me,” he said. “I’ll just come back as a ghost and bother you for the rest of your life.” These unexpected words were enough to end the threat; to deflate a potentially dangerous situation. No one laughed but everyone on the chow line breathed more easily.

Besides the chapel, the library, the education classes and the detail assignments to get prisoners out of their cells, there is the recreation department. Here is another fixture in all prisons, an option for inmates of every stripe to pursue. Football, baseball, soccer, track, tennis, table tennis, basketball, shuffleboard and more are often available. If anyone ever seeks to create a brochure to attract people to prison—or at least to ameliorate their fears of being in one—a good place to start is the recreation department.

*Rec yards*, a standard feature of all prisons, are not what they sound like. Rarely are they square or small. More than anything, they resemble a park. Or a high school or college athletic field. Invariably, they are well maintained. That’s because of the pride that prisoners take in them. Inmates may not have much to remind them of the outside world, but this patch of earth with grass and sometimes shrubs and flowers resembles a quality park in a suburban community. Even an upscale community. Few parks or schools have enough maintenance workers to keep their grounds in such good shape. But in prison, labor is no problem. There might be dozens of motivated inmates assigned to the upkeep of the rec yard. It’s a work detail that’s very popular. Considering the outside leisure time and communing with nature possibilities, several inmates are usually assigned to stroll around the yard for an hour or so daily to pick up litter. Not much will be found since prisons contain so few consumables. Perhaps a candy wrapper here, a napkin there. Since cigarette smoking has been banned from virtually all prisons as a health care cost-saving measure, there are no butts to pick up anymore.

One inmate I met named Kenneth had an unusual job in the recreation department of FCI Petersburg. He taught an exercise class for an hour a day. This in itself was not unusual since other inmates at the prison taught classes. What made it different was Kenneth’s age. He was 67. He may have looked it but he didn’t act it. Prisoners half his age who signed up for his class had trouble keeping up with him. Within a half hour of the start of each session, most were exhausted.
While they rested, Kenneth continued doing difficult gyrations as he faced the rows of reclining men before him. With the sound of music blaring from a boom box—often Motown—he never missed a beat. As everything else was free in prison, except the canteen, there was no cost for the class. Still, appreciative inmates sought to express their thanks in more than words. They all gave him a similar gift, which he couldn’t get enough of. I found out about the item when I approached him: “What can I get you the next time I go to canteen?” Kenneth answered, “I’m fussy about what I put in my body. Get me a can of juice and I’ll be happy.” So that’s what the men in the class did. At the end of each session, Kenneth received the cans we had brought. He walked across the compound with an armful of them. From a distance it looked like he was carrying trophies. But they were better than awards; he could drink them. And drink to his fellow prisoners who had decided to spend their time in his class when there were competing activities in this crowded community to occupy them.
Chapter Three

Escaping Prison through the Arts

Prisoners have a lot of choices in how to spend their time. There are many activities to choose from. It’s not unusual to find inmates so busy that they pass up some good opportunities in favor of others they would like to pursue. They just don’t have the time to do everything.

I remember my stay at Cross City C.I. when I joined a club called the Jaycees. It had a charter from the organization’s national headquarters, operating as any free-world club did. Except that ours was more active and had a lot more projects going on. The idea behind the Jaycees is to focus on community service. We accomplished that by treating the prison as our community. We sponsored a number of events, including talent shows and movie nights. The turnout was good but not great. That reflected the fact that we were competing with other things available to the prisoners. To attract them to our movie nights, we offered incentives. The fact that we were showing recent movies on a big screen TV with an excellent sound system wasn’t enough. We brewed fresh coffee and made popcorn for each screening. As inmates arrived they were given a cup of coffee and a bag of popcorn to enjoy during the movie. That and the free admission often came close to filling the place. We also made sure that we were selecting popular titles.

Florida Bible Belt politicians had passed a law saying that inmates couldn’t view R-rated movies. But at our insistence, sympathetic staff who rented the movies for us ignored the rule. Said one of them, “Who the fuck is going know what is being shown here?” Did they worry about their jobs as they sided with us on this and other things? Apparently not. Considering the high turnover of prison officers, they didn’t expect themselves to stay very long anyway. Low pay and high stress are the chief reasons for quitting. I got an indication of how low the pay was when an officer told me of his plans to leave. “They offered me the next level position but I turned it down. It only pays ten percent more than I get now, and ten percent of nothing is still nothing.”

Our Jaycees club had a number of elective positions, from president on down. But they weren’t easy to fill since they entailed extra meetings and additional responsibilities. Most inmates couldn’t fit such new duties into their busy schedules. It was common for
someone to be nominated for a post, only to turn it down with a variety of excuses. "I'm coaching a baseball team." "I'm in the band and have to rehearse for a show." "I'm part of a Bible study group." "I have a class I need to write a paper for."

I remember one night when we were nominating inmates for positions. I was so busy that evening that I couldn't get to the meeting on time. I had another meeting to attend. By the hour I arrived at the Jaycees, the nominations were concluded and the elections were about to begin. This phase was less important than the nominations since with so few people willing to take positions, most nominees ran unopposed. I was spotted by the president of the group as I stepped into the meeting room. "Dennis, I have some news for you," he said in a voice that one might use to deliver bad tidings. "You've been nominated for the position of ...."

I cut him off and delivered a short speech I had prepared for such an occasion. My suspicion that they would take advantage of my absence had been confirmed. That's how desperate they were to fill positions. Still I surprised everyone when I said, "I don't care what position I've been nominated for, I accept!"

You could almost hear the sigh of relief that filled the room. The president smiled for the first time. "Now, that's the spirit we like to hear." The elections proceeded and, unopposed, I won the office of State Director. It was a fancy title that meant I would be writing letters and helping other inmates write letters to strengthen ties with other Jaycee clubs across the state.

What the president didn't know when I accepted the nomination was that before prison I had an active political career that never resulted in a nomination. I had tried hard to get to that point but it never happened. I wasn't mainstream enough. On the campaign trail seeking nomination, I always erred on the side of truthfulness. My mother called me an idealist, the Washington Post derogatorily labeled me a perennial candidate. If they only could see me at that Jaycees meeting.

Once nominated, I forgot about my busy schedule. Nothing could detract me from taking advantage of this opportunity. It didn’t occur to me that I had to go to prison to win my first election. Maybe my desire to be victorious—regardless of circumstances—made me a born politician after all.

I faithfully fulfilled the duties of my position. One day the vice president of the club came to me with a letter he had drafted. It would be mailed to an outside group whose help we sought for a project we were considering. The inmate was a good VP but a bad letter writer. He didn’t know it, however. When I suggested
corrections to his letter, he became offended. “Your letter is good.” I lied, “but there’s no harm in making it even better.” We sat together and worked through it. He saw the improvements being made and his anger slowly dissipated. When we finished he reluctantly thanked me. I said in response, “Thank you too—for not killing me.” I thought I detected a slight smile on his face but couldn’t be sure. It was enough that this lifer with nothing going for him on the outside, but had a busy schedule on the inside, had accepted my recommendations.

Wardens know the value of allowing inmates to keep busy with positive pursuits. They want to make prisons bearable for all, inmates and staff alike. To be sure that hands and minds are occupied. That’s 90 percent of the battle to bring about peace and serenity.

That may be an important objective for wardens, but where does that leave the welfare of the outside world to which 95 percent of all inmates will eventually return? Model inmates on the inside often become maladjusted on the outside. The reason is that adjusting to prison is no preparation for a successful reentry to the free world. How can one adjust to freedom after becoming comfortable with the lack of it? The path to success in prison is much different than the road that must be traveled on the outside after the gates open. A prisoner’s body, being in good shape as is usually the case, will be up for the challenge. But his mind will not be. It will be riddled with barbed wire, punctured with insecurities, and rusted by the lack of challenges to live by one’s own wit rather than to rely on the largess of others. The minds of model prisoners are prepared for just one thing: more imprisonment. You can take an inmate out of the prison, but you can’t take the prison out of the inmate. At least not easily.

During his time at FCI Petersburg, Marion Barry, the former mayor of Washington, DC, was legendary for being a prison rule breaker. He wanted to keep his mind free, so he thought for himself. That included his decision to get very cozy in the visiting room with women who came to see him. Barry didn’t see why he should stop being an active heterosexual just because he was in prison. He figured where there’s a will, there’s a way. He wasn’t about to give up that will just because its expression might conflict with prison regulations. Those regulations would remain in effect long after Barry departed. Why carry them with him in his mind? Best to dispense with them at the earliest opportunity while still on the inside. A smart man and a brilliant politician, Barry couldn’t see any other way to prepare for release.

Life on the outside is a matter of winning and losing, of taking chances, of constantly moving forward despite setbacks. But
there are no setbacks on the inside for model prisoners. Each day blends into the next. Then the time arrives when the sentence is completed. The change is abrupt and often impossible to handle. What was once a secure existence gets turned on its head. Pressures are intense on the outside. Obstacles are high, disappointment rampant. The mind of the complacent prisoner is incapable of responding because it is not a free mind. It can’t be if it didn’t grasp freedom on the inside when it could have done so. He had compromised himself by allowing his mind to be caged, so that his body could be relatively free. His mistake will likely return him to prison.

Thinking independently and creatively in prison is a challenge. Everything experienced on the inside militates against it. An inmate must look at either the short run or the long run. The short run means getting by in prison with a minimum amount of effort. Go along and get along. The long run means keeping one’s individuality, which will serve an inmate well no matter where he winds up when he gets out. Of course, lifers don’t have to be concerned about this. In their case, the short term is fine. They’re experiencing retirement so they make life easy by going along with any rules and programs they encounter. But if there’s any chance of getting out, and most lifers do have a chance, they had better start removing their minds from prison as early as possible.

The best way to prepare for release is to become a misfit in prison. To do things that no one would expect from a prisoner. Because they go against an inmate’s immediate self-interest. Rather than conform, these inmates make their own choices, difficult ones that can be painful for the duration of their sentence. This amounts to being a leader rather a follower, even when no one is following.

We are talking about engaging in creative pursuits. As the term implies, people who do this are creating rather than consuming something. It’s always easier to do the latter than the former. In prison it’s especially easy since everything one needs to sustain life is present for the asking.

In the book, *The Reader*, which became a major movie, the character Hanna spent 18 years in prison. During that time she consumed books, audiotapes and of course food. She led a peaceful life and was considered by all to be a model inmate. Her cell was small but comfortable, meeting all her needs. During the day she worked in a sewing shop doing routine work that gave her solitude and put her into the good graces of the prison administrators. They liked to boast that their wards were productive.
Hanna entered prison fit and spry. By the end of her sentence she was fat and sedate. She had given up, resigned herself to living a contented life as a trustworthy and predictable inmate. So comfortable did she become with existence on the inside that she passed up opportunities to spend a few hours on occasion in the community. Such an option was possible in the progressive German prison where she was incarcerated. As her release date approached, she half-heartedley made plans to get a job and a place to live on the outside. Thanks to a free-world friend, she was successful on both counts. But even her friend couldn’t change her subconscious attachment to prison or alleviate her fear of not being able to fit into the outside world.

Arriving in prison, Hanna had been unable to read or write. That condition had limited her earlier employment options. Literacy might have helped her avoid becoming a criminal. The author strongly implies that to be the case. In prison she worked hard at and succeeded in learning able to read and write. More employable than ever, Hanna was no different from many inmates who are determined to improve their skills while they have the time to do so in prison. We have already seen that, in addition to GED classes, prisons today offer many academic and vocational programs. Inmates can master impressive skills by the time they complete their sentence.

Everything looked bright for Hanna on the day of her planned release. But external appearances can be deceptive. Inside her head she was less prepared to leave prison that the first day she entered. As time had passed, her dependency on being a consumer had grown. She had adjusted to being in a welfare state where you don’t have to lift a finger to have all your needs met. You don’t even have to lift a pen to sign anything, not even a welfare application. Everything is done for you, anything you need is automatically provided. Her job in the sewing shop gave outsiders the impression that she was more than a consumer. But there is a huge difference between prison work and outside employment. Inmates can’t be forced to work in prison; they can refuse. Little can be done to them for doing so. And under no circumstances will they be kicked out of this welfare arrangement before their sentence is up.

In his book *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela talked about the various work assignments he had during his 27 years in prison. There was no significant period of hard work, ever. He and other inmates realized that they could work as much or as little as they chose. The very idea of putting prisoners to work was more for appearances than to serve a productive purpose. The printing plant at FCI Petersburg where I worked lost money each year. The inmate at
the work camp in Cross City C.I. managed to get back to prison, which would have eventually happened had he refused to work at the camp.

Mandela describes a typical day in his prison job. He and other prisoners were marched to a local quarry. They found the walk in the outdoors pleasant, which is why they agreed to the work assignment. When they reached the quarry they were issued shovels. Rarely did they employ them the way they were intended. They were primarily used to lean against as the men stood around all day talking to each other and enjoying the fresh air. Occasionally a car would be seen in the distance carrying an official coming to make an inspection. The prison officer at the quarry would then plead with the men he was supervising to give the appearance of working. If they liked the staffer or could exact favors from him, they would use their shovels and comply. The inspection would be made, the car would leave and they’d go back to their loafing.

Hanna, when faced with the prospect of the real world on the last day of her sentence, refused to pack her belongings to leave. Instead she converted her multi-year sentence into a death sentence, killing herself. As bad as she might have thought the welfare state of prison was, she sensed that the free world would be worse.

She wasn’t the first or the last to commit suicide when facing a difficult or uncertain future, inside or out. It happens often during periods of economic slump. Wealthy people lose their money in the stock market and suddenly find themselves in a position where they have to get a job. These are well qualified people, often with education from top Ivy League schools. But they choose the path of suicide. They simply don’t see life worth living as a producer after being a consumer for so long. They don’t know how to create since creativity takes effort that they never had to expend.

Inside or outside prison, creative pursuits involve risks and hard work. The payoff is in the long run, although even in prison, if one pays close attention, the rewards will come in various ways. Sometimes in small degrees, and at other times more dramatically.

When I wrote books, plays, essays, musicals, short stories, songs, poems and screenplays in prison, I found the creation process difficult, with few immediate rewards. In fact, I aroused a lot of suspicion with my hard work. What was I writing, and why was I spending so much time doing it? Was I trying to rock the boat in some way? Did I think I was better than others?

I wasn’t discouraged by comments or concerned looks. Still I took precautions. The last thing I wanted to see happen was my writing or music stolen or destroyed. In retrospect I think I was being
paranoid. When people see that a person creating something is serious about his or her endeavor, they generally leave that person alone. Perhaps it’s fear that a serious person won’t be intimidated and can turn on them. Or maybe when people see a writing instrument in action they recall the saying that “the pen is mightier than the sword.” Why take a chance of being impaled on it and having something unkind written by attempting to interfere with the creative process?

One of my precautionary measures was to limit myself in the amount of creative time I spent each day. I did this for the appearance of others so they wouldn’t regard me as a fanatic. But I also did it for myself so I wouldn’t burn out. The same self-discipline applied to an exercise regime I started early in my sentence. I decided to do three sets of push-ups of 10 each and three sets of sit-ups of 25 each daily. I could do it by devoting 15 minutes per day to the task, including rests between sets. But I lengthened that to at least half an hour to an hour by walking briskly between sets. If out on a prison track in the rec yard, I would walk around it, each time doing another set until my daily quota was met.

When I started this exercise program I was 50 years old. I couldn’t do more than one or two push-ups and only a few sit-ups at first. But I stuck with it until I reached the level where I wanted to be. It didn’t take long. Then I stuck with it, never missing a day. It became part of my daily routine. I found I could do much more than the number of exercises that I had allocated, but I was careful not to. I didn’t want this to be such a nuisance that I would have a reason to discontinue. Not only did it stay with me in prison but I continued it after my release. Walking around Washington, DC, I was tempted on occasion to stop to do a set of pushups or sit-ups as I did on the prison yard. If no one was looking, such as late at night, I’d do one or two. But I found the sidewalks much dirtier on my hands and clothes than prison had been. I therefore usually waited until I got home.

Like exercising, my creative writing and music composition took the form of a specific daily goal—a quota. I created a self-imposed writing requirement of 10 pages per day. I came up with that number after reading a biography about Stephen King. It noted that he wrote 10 pages daily. I figured that if he could do it, so could I. After all, King has a lot of other things competing with his time. He has money to deposit, bills to pay, shopping to do, a woman to hold, a car to drive and other pleasures and responsibilities of an upscale life. I had none of these in prison, hence no distractions. Ten pages per day, I figured, would be easy for me. And it was. Once I developed it as a habit, it was similar to my regime of exercising, becoming second nature. Not that I looked forward to doing it each
day. Again, it’s much easier to consume than create, and writing 10 pages meant five hours at least of concentrated effort. A trick I used to get going, which I continue to employ today, is to combine consumption with production. While I created I would devour treats that I had saved for the occasion. It might be fruit, dessert, snacks, a beverage or something else I liked. As I completed each page, I popped a treat in my mouth. It works for horses, doesn’t it? And it certainly works for me. There are some things that you can’t leave to chance.

Besides the daily quota of 10 pages, there were other things I read about King that I also applied to my creative routine. King said he didn’t like working in a quiet environment. He liked loud rock and roll music playing while he wrote. Prisons are anything but quiet settings. If King could do it, so could I. Background noise, I soon discovered, can help in the creative process. I forced myself to block it out of my awareness, and in doing so, increased my concentration on what I was creating. Of course King was specific in the type of background sounds he wanted. He kept a radio tuned to a rock and roll station. One day the station decided to change to another format of music. By then, King was affluent enough to have a say over it. He bought the station and dictated that it would play rock and roll only. When inmates and officers spend years amid steel doors clanging open and shut in prison, it’s not much different than listening to rock and roll.

If I did need quiet, such as to edit or proof something I had written, I could turn off all sounds in a simple way. I would use earplugs made from a material that no jail is without: toilet tissue. To convert the paper into earplugs, I took a small amount, wet it, and formed the plugs with my fingers as I squeezed the water out. Then I put them into my ears. When I was through wearing them, I put them in a handy place such as under my “mattress.” Because the mattresses in prison are so thin, they wouldn’t crush these homemade earplugs, particularly after they dried. Speaking of which, when they did dry, all I had to do was add a little moisture so that they’d form a seal again on insertion. That was the way to achieve maximum sound blocking.

The homemade earplugs worked so well that I didn’t give them up when I was able to acquire a set of manufactured ones. I got these from a friend who worked in a prison factory. When he gave them to me, I thought he had presented me with the Holy Grail. Naturally I was anxious to try them since having such a possession was a sign of prestige in prison, whether or not they would work better than the toilet tissue variety. After a few months of use I woke
up in a panic. I was completely deaf in one ear. By the time I got to the prison clinic later that day, I feared the worst. What effect would deafness have on my music? Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder were blind, not deaf. Is this how it began for Beethoven, one ear at a time? After I was examined, the prison nurse proclaimed that I was experiencing a wax buildup that was impacting my eardrum. She flushed it out using a syringe device while I held a specially-shaped basin against my neck. It felt, and sounded, as if I had stuck my head underneath Niagara Falls. The flushing worked. Into the basin fell a small chunk of wax. I explained my use of the new foam earplugs and she said that it was almost certainly the cause. Either that or someone had shoved a candle into my ear. I got rid of the new earplugs and went back to my toilet tissue kind.

I didn’t need any music while I was creating, although sometimes I duplicated King’s approach. Virtually all prison canteens offer personal radios for sale. Because of my love of music, everywhere I went I had one. I listened as I wrote and found this to be a good way to work. It helped overcome writer’s block since the sounds stimulated one idea after another. Even if they were bad ideas, I had something to write, albeit for later revision. I liked this approach but in the end I decided on silence. That way I conserved on batteries. Believe it or not, prison isn’t all that distracting, even with its high noise level. There’s a routine that rarely varies, so there isn’t much happening to draw one’s attention. People dress the same way and generally act the same day after day. Head counts by staff occur at set times as do other daily events. It’s hardly necessary to think. All one has to do is follow what others are doing.

The noise one hears in prison eventually becomes unobtrusive, even if earplugs are not used. I wondered why King didn’t use them, instead opting for loud music to mask sounds. It occurred to me that he couldn’t use earplugs since they would have blocked out everything. He had to be alert to phone calls, knocks on his door, or fire engines coming to his house to rescue him should the place begin to burn. Those intrusions don’t exist in prison. In the event of an evacuation due to a fire or other emergency, the inmates are rounded up and escorted to a safer place. Simply follow the leader.

A final feature of King’s commitment to his writing that gave me pause for thought was his perseverance. He kept creating even when commercial success seemed beyond his reach. King wrote six complete novels before he found a publisher for one of them. And even then, the publisher cut the manuscript substantially. Only later
when King became a big success was he able to restore the novel and publish it in its entirety.

I kept churning out piece after piece, sometimes sending them to publishers but usually not bothering. Getting financially compensated for what I wrote was unnecessary; my rent was paid and would continue to be for some time. Only when I emerged from prison would I have to turn my labor into income. In the meantime I sought to experiment; to create in the fullest sense of the word. Whatever manuscripts I completed would be like money in the bank. A savings account of potentially valuable assets. Plus I knew that with each work I completed, I was getting better. My confidence in that stemmed from observations I made when I ran for mayor of Washington in 1982.

There were several candidates in the race, led by Marion Barry, the colorful incumbent and frontrunner. I made it a point to debate him at every opportunity. There were over 75 chances to do that. Civic groups and community associations throughout DC held forums for all candidates to speak. I went to present my positions. With each debate I became more comfortable. I felt I was being taken more seriously as time went on. Toward the end of the campaign, one of my early detractors, writer Juan Williams of the Washington Post said to me, “Dennis, I admire your tenacity.”

What opened my eyes to the power of persistence was the performance of another candidate, Morris Harper. He was a minor player given little chance of victory. Harper began his campaign as a terrible public speaker. So much so that he was an embarrassment to the rest of us. When he opened his mouth we all shuddered to think what would come out next. Would he be incomprehensible, illogical, inaudible? People had to work hard to control snickers when Morris spoke. He was an amateur of the first order, and glaringly so. But that changed the more he spoke. By the end of the campaign, less than six months after it began, he was a seasoned veteran. At the last debate he was riveting in his delivery. Everyone, from the other candidates to the audience, was impressed.

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Not only did I sense myself getting better in prison as I plowed forward in my writing and music composing, but I was becoming more diversified. It wasn’t merely the fact that I wrote everything from screenplays to pop songs, but I dealt with different subjects. I even varied historical settings. Creative people on the outside often lose their creativity when they score a big success.
They know they’ve developed a formula that “works.” They have an audience that wants more of the same. Examples abound. J.K. Rowling began her Harry Potter books while living on welfare. Once the first one put money in her purse, she wrote more. Why chance going back on welfare by trying something new? Hank Williams had his country songs. John Grisham his legal novels. Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, grew so tired of the formula he created that he finally killed Holmes in what he thought would be his last detective book. But his publisher, family and fans hounded him until he produced more. The only way Doyle could get rid of the format was by dying himself. Hank Williams was not yet 30 when he drank himself to death. Grisham keeps himself from burning out by writing no more than one legal novel a year.

My advantage was obscurity. No one demanded that I produce anything. To the world I was out of sight behind prison walls, and therefore out of mind. At the same time I had no unmet personal needs, no expenses whatsoever. I once went for six years without buying anything at all from the prison canteen. It took time to make purchases there. Better to devote it to writing and music. Plus, I didn’t need anything.

Let prison be a period of experimentation for me, I figured. And of escape. My creative skills would be my passport to the world. My pen would take me anywhere I wanted to go. Why confine myself to one place or a single historical period? Never mind if anyone else was interested in going there. I would make the journey myself: Become the ultimate explorer, beholden to no king, no trade company, no publisher, and no producer.

Sometimes the direction of where to go came from books I read. Television never appealed to me, inside or outside prison. I found it to be too confining. Programs were created for viewers to watch at specific times. I didn’t want anyone but myself to set a time schedule or do any programming for me. My influences would come from other sources. Particularly offensive to me are commercial interruptions on TV. How can people put up with unwanted intrusions into their consciousness? To me it was equivalent to making love to a sensuous and skillful woman who had the annoying habit of stopping the action from time to time to make an unrelated statement. I was once married to such a woman. It didn’t work out.

Books have an advantage over visual presentations. They are experienced personally, individually. Readers move along at their own pace, stopping and starting as they wish. Pausing to contemplate passages. Re-reading particularly dense or exciting pages. I know of many people who do research by reading books, but none by
watching TV. In prison I limited my consumption to books. Here were not only examples of what could be accomplished with a pen, but inspiration and ideas of what I could do.

A place and time period to which I escaped on occasion was Nazi Germany. That may seem like an odd choice for a prisoner. Why go to a land where freedom was rare, persecution a frequent occurrence, cowardice a common condition? I traveled there in my reading and writing in an attempt to understand a society gone awry. One with misguided laws, mindless prosecutors and much injustice. Things I started to see beginning in contemporary America. Hitler represented the height of evil. If I could understand how his prevalence and popularity over a 13-year reign occurred, perhaps I could grasp why millions of people, most of them harmless and some like me falsely convicted, could be incarcerated in the United States. The story of how it happened, in the thirties and today, is too sad to relate in detail. It has to do with the human condition, the banality of evil, and the fear of the unknown, whether of Jews, drug users or unconventional idealists.

I was criticized for going back to this period by both family and friends. Rabbi Dennis Beck-Berman lectured me in the prison chapel during a Torah lesson. I had told him about the latest Holocaust account I was reading. “Why dwell on the past?” he said. For a while I felt like an oddball because of my interest in the period. But when I got out of prison, I realized that I was not alone. For example I saw advertised in the newspapers on a single day three major motion pictures dealing with the subject: The Reader starring Kate Winslet, Defiance featuring Daniel Craig, and Valkyrie with Tom Cruise. These films are both insightful and inspiring. They show that standing up to evil is possible. That justice can prevail. That the fight itself is worth pursuing even if not always immediately successful. If a person is destined to die at the hands of a tyrant, what’s the difference if it happens quickly or gradually? One may as well act nobly and place some meaning on his or her existence by speaking out.

In my extensive reading and research of the period, I sought examples of heroism, even marginal ones. For this purpose I even engaged in correspondence with the newly opened Holocaust Museum, which would be one of my first places to visit upon exiting prison. When I came across an individual or event that I found particularly inspiring, I used it as a starting point for my own creative journey of escape.

I wrote a screenplay called Sobibor after I read a book about an uprising at a Nazi concentration camp. One thing that impressed
me about the incident was the name of the Nazi prison, Sobibor, so close to my own name, Sobin. More remarkable was the day of the uprising, October 14, 1943. It was the day I was born.

Over 500 inmates escaped the clutches of Nazis that day. There were also many who perished. But they didn’t die in vain. Their bravery would be applauded, including by a person who came into the world that very day.

Since a book had already been written about the uprising, I decided to create a screenplay. Normally a writer doesn’t set about to write a complete screenplay. The writer pitches an idea to a producer to get the go ahead. Most ideas don’t fly, even good ones. There’s just too much competition for production dollars. I’m sure that if I had been on the outside pitching my Sobibor idea, the screenplay would not have been written. I say this despite my normal optimism because, I later discovered, the uprising at Sobibor had already been made into a film. Since I didn’t know that in my prison isolation, I proceeded ahead anyway. What difference did it make since I had the financial independence to undertake any project I wanted. It was as if I had been given a grant to write it. The government was paying all my expenses.

In writing a movie version of Sobibor, I fleshed out the personalities and motivations of the characters I read about. It was an exciting thing to do. My approach was to model characters after people I knew. After all, there are only so many types of personalities in the world. A writer can mix and match them to come up with any combination. I found it easy to understand and describe the leading figures in the escape at Sobibor. They were all in prison like me. I imagined who among my inmate friends would participate in an escape if our prison started gassing inmates as Sobibor did. Who would be the leader? What would it take to convince 500 others of the necessity and viability of a plan to escape?

Then I turned to the Nazi officers at Sobibor who stood in the way of survival. Several would have to be killed. That wouldn’t be an easy task, either logistically or emotionally. I thought of who among the officers at our prison would be vulnerable to being disposed of, which ones would let an inmate get close enough to allow it to happen.

I not only wrote the screenplay but I lived it. When the Sobibor leaders engaged in their planning I was among them. When they inspired others to participate, I was there. When they burst forward from the prison leaving dead staffers and many of their crushed or cowardly comrades behind, I was part of the exodus. Being in prison I didn’t have to strain my imagination to picture all
this happening. After finishing the screenplay, whenever I re-read or thought about it, I imagined the movie about Sobibor had already been made.

When I got out of prison, I discovered that it had in fact been released. That meant my screenplay wouldn’t stand a chance of being transferred to film. No matter since I wasn’t banking on it. Instead of disappointment, I thought how fortunate I was not having known about the film’s existence when I began writing the screenplay. Otherwise I would not have done it, thereby denying myself a rewarding and creative experience. I wouldn’t have done it because I sought to have whatever I produced prosper commercially. That was important to me because the thought of spinning my wheels was unsatisfying. It was admitting defeat, the equivalent of breaking rocks in prison for no other reason other than to stay busy. That wasn’t my idea of a life, even a prison life.

Not much of the voluminous writing and composing that I did in prison has found a home yet, but that can still happen. It might take place next year or a hundred years from now. My creations that have already been published or produced convince me that I chose the right path of creating for future demand.

Hope runs eternal, even with my Sobibor screenplay. After exiting prison, I made a point of getting the DVD of the movie and viewing it. Perhaps my treatment of the story was superior or sufficiently different so that I still had a viable literary property. As I watched Escape from Sobibor, starring Alan Arkin, I saw that what I had written was a more accurate telling of the story. But it wasn’t as appealing to a mass audience. Sometimes you can be too truthful, and that is what I had done. The men and women who escaped from Sobibor accomplished a heroic feat. But to do it, some of their behavior was distinctly not what one associates with heroes.

In the Arkin film, for example, the prisoners kill the most violent and abusive Nazis who are guarding them, thereby making escape possible. In fact these were not the officers targeted by the prisoners. The worst Nazis wouldn’t come close enough to the inmates to allow that to happen. They despised the prisoners and kept their distance. Only the Germans who had some kindness in them, some sympathy for the prisoners, let their defenses down long enough to be slaughtered. I dealt with that in my screenplay as a moral issue, and told it accurately. But I could see why the Arkin film avoided that. People don’t like their heroes to be unattractive in any way. Neither physically nor morally unattractive. Forget about the fact that everyone is human. Or that sometimes principles are compromised in order to achieve a more important goal.
After completing my screenplay of Sobibor, I embarked on projects unrelated to that historical period. But I eventually returned to it. One screenplay I wrote took me into the highest ranks of the German military. In reading the seminal history Rise and Fall of the Third Reich by William Shirer, I absorbed the story in it of a dashing German general who tried to be a good Nazi but was unsuccessful. He was too caught up in professional soldiering and in a lifelong love affair that endured for all seasons. Hitler finally found him useless and put him out to pasture, which suited the general fine. He had reached a point in his life where he wanted to make love not war.

What struck me most was that the general was a good man. He was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time in history. The man was eventually imprisoned by the Allies as a war criminal when Germany lost the conflict. The victors didn’t have time or interest to evaluate the relative degree of danger that their enemies had posed. He had been a general for Hitler once, and that’s all that mattered.

But the story didn’t end with his incarceration. His lover didn’t abandon him. Instead she became a regular visitor and a means of support. This was the ultimate test of their romance, and they both passed with flying colors. In many ways, prison brought them closer together, even physically. Because of the general’s stature, she was allowed to stay with him from time to time in his cell. It was a far cry from the luxury villas and stylish travel they had once shared. But they didn’t mind as long as they had each other.

I wrote this screenplay to remind myself that people can love each other in good times and bad. That the coldness and animosity that my son and sister showed me as my time in prison advanced didn’t have to be.

Whereas most of the writing I did that took me to other lands and time periods was a physical escape, my screenplay about the general was an emotional getaway. It gave me the courage to write a full length novel about my family that gave me further emotional catharsis. It was the third work that I had set in Nazi Germany. I put my family into it, preserving their mannerisms, their personalities and their priorities. I made my mother heroic because she had always had that aura about her.

It was based on a true story that seemed to fit my family perfectly. A German woman of the Nazi period had distinguished herself by saving her Jewish husband after he was picked up by the Gestapo with other Jewish men involved in mixed marriages. In my
novel, my mother was that woman. The wives of these men joined together to picket the Gestapo to get their men released. It was the only recorded public demonstration against Hitler, and it succeeded. I pictured my mother as the leader of that group. The rest of my family played supporting roles but didn’t come up to my mother’s strength and standards. I even depicted myself as inferior, a hothead whose boisterous anti-Nazism was unpolitical, ineffective and ultimately an embarrassment to my family. To keep the character I played from going to prison where he would be a further blight and strain on his family, I arranged for his relocation to America. Exile.

With the exception of my mother, the family hated my book. I was surprised since I didn’t change anything about them in it. They were simply a normal family living in extraordinary times. Just like most of the German families of the period. Hitler was an evil, but as long as he didn’t touch their lives directly or in a negative way, they were loathe to rock the boat, to be the first to put their heads on the chopping block. When my mother’s character in the book was finally forced to act, the rest of the family reluctantly supported her. I never raised the question in the book of whether they were more afraid of her than Hitler.

Writing the book gave me a lot of insight, which helped in my emotional growth. It allowed me to see my family—all of them—as fallible human beings. Me too. We may not always see eye to eye, but the unity we once shared had a power of its own. I felt it was worth restoring and for a long time I believed they agreed. But as soon as my mother died, my son and sister showed themselves to be more petty and self-centered than I could ever imagine. Or maybe I could have imagined it. Perhaps that’s why I wrote the book in the first place. To see how strong my family would be in the face of adversity. In the book they held together but only when the glue of my mother was applied.

In writing the novel as an escape from prison, I wasn’t so much traveling to another country and century as I was entering the minds of my loved ones. Up until then this had been unexplored territory for me. I never before had the will or the energy to go there. But in prison I could put off the journey no longer. I was running out of time, literally. My sentence would be up and my frail mother would likely not be around when I returned. Who else could I rely on? Did anyone in the family have her strength, her intelligence, her drive? Reflecting on the reluctance and reserve they demonstrated in the book—even giving them every benefit of the doubt—I concluded that they did not.
The realization woke me up to the need to prepare for outside life without them. I didn’t expect that they would steal my inheritance and my savings but I didn’t rule it out either. In writing about them I could see that weak people who lose their compass can act in desperate and shameful ways. Saddened by this realization, it nonetheless prepared me for a life of self-reliance and self-determination upon release.

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I created dozens of works on other subjects. But I wrote a fourth and final one about the Hitler epoch. It was a musical about the Holocaust, the world’s first and, as of this writing, the only one as far as I know. Like my other Nazi-era creations, A Stitch in Time was based on a true account. In fact, I changed very few facts in it.

In subsequent chapters, I’ll go into more detail about the musical. It deserves special treatment because this creative endeavor, beyond all my hopes and expectations, got its world premiere at the Kennedy Center before a packed house. It was not only an artistic success but a financial one. A backer was found who paid for the presentation and also for a studio-produced CD of it for later world distribution.

The process of writing A Stitch in Time began when I read a book about a Holocaust survivor that differed from dozens of other accounts I had read. This one struck an unusual balance of hope and helplessness, of courage and acquiescence, of caring for others and concern for oneself. Written almost 60 years after the end of the Holocaust, it could not have been penned earlier because of the approach it took. Shortly after the Holocaust, books about tragedy first started to appear. They were largely diatribes of condemnation. They depicted all the Germans as bad and all Jews as entirely at their mercy, as if the latter could make no decisions on their own, whether inside or outside concentration camps. They were victims only, so if they cooperated with the Nazis or beat each other to death to please the Nazis, it wasn’t their fault.

As the Holocaust became better understood, many heroes emerged. Now the pendulum swung to the other side. The heroes were perfect individuals who did no wrong. They understood the sweep of history and their role in it, a role which they performed flawlessly. They were superhuman to the point of being hard to believe. Rather than made of flesh and blood, they were mythological in stature. Their strengths and skills took them places that mortals could not travel.
Then came the final phase, memoirs written by people who had not only lived to tell about the Holocaust, but had survived a long life after it. They wrote in their last senior years when they didn’t have the energy or desire to fabricate. They told it as it was. The highs and lows, the tragedies and triumphs, the mixture of courage and convenience that colors most of our actions.

When I read the account upon which *A Stitch in Time* was based, I knew this was a story worth telling. It rang of truth. About an individual who had the brains, talent and cunning to make it through the gauntlet of terror that was the Nazi regime. Who had to sacrifice his family, one at a time, in order to keep moving forward. Who refused to suppress his needs, including his sexual ones. Why survive if one can’t lead a full life? He wanted it all and he succeeded in getting it, even while under the Nazi thumb. He helped other Jews but mostly he helped himself. By the end of the Holocaust, despite years of concentration camp living, he had a long romance with a beautiful girlfriend and put on extra pounds.

My idea to tell this story as a musical came to me after repeated viewings of *Fiddler on the Roof* and *1776*. The first one was available for viewing at the chapel of FCI Petersburg, and the second at the library there. Both dealt with weighty subjects: *Fiddler* with the persecution of Jews in czarist Russia and *1776* with compromises that the founding fathers of the U.S. felt compelled to make, including allowing slavery to continue in America. Presenting these subjects in musical form gave them great depth. Why couldn’t the Holocaust be treated the same way, particularly with a well rounded and human story at its center? It would be a bold experiment, but what did I have to lose? I was already in prison. If I couldn’t take chances there, how could I expect to take any on the outside?

While I usually worked alone in creating my art, I decided to involve other inmates in this project. That decision was partly due to my being musically involved with other prisoners. In pursuing the new project, I could combine work with play. Play as in playing music. It would give me a break from the solitary writing and composing I normally did. Besides, if the collaboration didn’t go anywhere I had nothing to lose but time. It was a commodity I had plenty of.

My closest collaborator was Lee Amirault, whom I introduced before and who would show up again on the outside in the successful premiere of our work at the Kennedy Center. Together we brought in other prisoners whom we admired for their musical originality and positive spirit.
With the writing team formed, I challenged them to help me create the songs and refine and improve the narrative and dialogue I had written. In fact they wrote most of the music without my involvement. They were as committed to the project as I was. For all of us it proved an effective escape from our daily prison lives. The characters in the musical not only spoke to us about a situation far worse than our own and how they had removed themselves from it, but they sang about it. Music has the ability to stir emotions far more than the spoken word. It creates a special feeling, an exaltation.

I don’t recommend that all creative pursuits in prison be done in collaboration with others. There are too many factors that can get in the way of successful completion. Inmates can get transferred, put in the hole or released. It’s best that prisoners rely on themselves. After all, when they exit prison they will have to stand on their own. Better to hit the ground running, with no one to depend upon or hold them back. Still, an occasional collaboration can do wonders to instill a team spirit. Just like the men and women at Sobibor who assisted each other in their mass escape. With each creative project I undertook in prison, I experienced a sense of escape. And when I involved others we all left together for the duration of the undertaking.
Chapter 4
Resolving to Return Home a Success

When I wasn’t creating in prison I was reading. I focused on works of nonfiction that educated more than they entertained. Many men delve into fiction and fantasy to get them through their prison stay. But there’s a danger in that. They often get stuck in the role of consumers instead of producers. And only the latter will help them when they get out of prison.

One inmate I knew, an avid reader, was so content reading books in prison that he didn’t care whether he stayed out or not upon release. Sure enough he returned within a year of departing. I asked him what had happened, as I did all recidivists I knew. He seemed to have adjusted so well on the outside from the letters he wrote us. Too well, as it turned out. “My family got fed up with me,” he said. “Couldn’t stand my reading books all day. They wanted me to do something else with my life. But all I wanted to do was read.”

In one respect, reading for pure escape is a form of mental masturbation. It feels good at the moment but has no long term benefit. In fact there may be a negative side to it by fostering bad habits. Imagine someone on the outside who devotes his or her life to armchair adventure, to the exclusion of other activities. They are of little use to anyone.

On the other hand, there are many useful books that can be read in prison. One is by bestselling author Mark Bowden entitled *Guests of the Ayatollah*. It’s an exciting and perceptive nonfiction account of several dozen U.S. hostages who were captured and held for more than a year in the American Embassy in Iran. Any inmate will identify with this tale. The hostages didn’t know when their day of release would come. They endeavored to keep their hope alive and plan for their transition to the free world. They would do whatever was necessary to arrive home with their sanity and self-esteem intact. One of the hostages, said Bowden, “recognized that small acts of defiance preserved the prisoner’s sense of self-worth and remembered how good it had felt when he had been listening at night to his stolen radio, putting one over on the guards.” Another hostage “knew how to play the piano and was a lover of classical music... he spent hours memorizing Schumann’s *Carnaval* and piano works by Chopin, playing the music in his mind.” Other hostages used their creative energy to imagine the bright side of their pent-up lives. At one point they were moved from the embassy to a dungeon-like prison. As if this weren’t bad enough, a war began between Iran and Iraq. The
hostages were caught in the middle. At least one of them, according to Bowden, “wasn’t afraid. He reckoned that if he was going to sit through an aerial assault, few places were better than a prison. Its walls were many times thicker than a normal building.”

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Preparing for release was constantly on my mind. Even though I had a sentence of more than 10 years, I felt that the end might come sooner. While it proved to be wishful thinking, the thought never left me. What I didn’t want was to land on the outside without resources or direction. As the closest members of my family died or drifted away, I knew that strength would have to come from within me. Not a day passed when I didn’t succeed in learning something new that could be useful on the outside. I enrolled in courses, read meaningful and factual books, and made friends with positive people, both on the inside and outside. I sent a letter each day to one or another person I admired, usually after reading a book that the person had authored. I received a surprising number of letters in return, including one from Arun Gandhi, grandson of the great advocate and an activist in his own right, and correspondence from Jim Lehrer of TV news fame and Max Woodward of the Kennedy Center. Woodward’s response was the most encouraging.

Acquiring these contacts gave me more than strength; they gave me direction. I never halted my quest for self-improvement in prison. As a result, the motor within my head that drove me to greater heights never stopped running. While other released prisoners would have to struggle with a rapidly moving course of events on the outside and would suddenly have to swim upstream, I was already paddling furiously.

I wasn’t unique, but I was in the minority. Most prisoners I saw took the attitude that they were there to be taken care of. Or to sleep their sentences away. Their inertia reminded me of a rock, and the problem with a rock is that once it is tossed into the sea, it sinks quickly. Released inmates often run from one pursuit to another, and eventually drown of their own weight. They are like stones skipping upon the water. When they stand still, as they inevitably must, they drop to the bottom.

One thing that pushed me to be creative and productive in prison as I sought to avoid the perils of life on either side of the wall was my age. I was beyond the halfway point in my life. My knowledge and experience of the outside world was such that I saw
the opportunities that prison represented as soon as I got there. It didn’t seem much different than a college campus, albeit one that emphasized self study and a Spartan existence. Such an educational institution appealed to me. Unlike most other prisoners, I had achieved a number of academic milestones in my life. For starters, I had graduated from high school. But barely. I disliked it greatly with its regulated structure and constant surveillance of students, both physically and intellectually. Intellectual surveillance came with constant testing. If you didn’t cram your head with what teachers gave you to learn, you were marked a failure. High schoolers are treated like children, despite their advanced physical and mental development. In other cultures, 17- and 18-year olds are raising families and making their own way in the world. I’m not advocating such a thing for America but people that age should at least be treated with dignity and respect. Their independence and capabilities should be recognized.

I recently saw a cartoon in a newspaper. It showed a dog caged in a mesh wire truck marked “dog pound.” He was being incarcerated. As the vehicle pulled away he gave advice to a younger dog on the sidewalk who had the look of rebellion in him: “Don’t be an idiot, Larry. Stay in obedience school.” For many young people, that’s what high school represents and why they can’t stand it. My squeaking through discouraged me from going to college. But my mother prevailed in her insistence that I go. We had compromised. I would take a few college courses in the evening, but retain my full-time job during the day. Even though the employment paid minimum wage, the job gave me a sense of accomplishment and maturity that I never experienced in high school. I finally felt the way my body told me I should feel: grown up.

The courses I took at night added to that feeling. A pleasant surprise. They were nothing like the classes I had endured in high school. I could suddenly select what I wanted to study. In subsequent semesters when I had to take required courses to get a degree, I also experienced a big difference from my pre-college education. Maybe it was the empty time between classes that I could fill as I pleased. Or perhaps the option of skipping a class, though I rarely did. Even though the constraints of tests and grades existed, I had tremendous academic freedom. For the first time in my life I was motivated to study. As a result I soon had the reputation and grades of a superior student. All this while I continued to hold a full-time job. Thanks to my father, who now stepped into the picture after my mother started me on this course of action, my burden of balancing job and school grew lighter. He encouraged me to leave my labor intensive
supermarket work and obtain a governmental clerical position. Though reluctant because it paid no better, I nonetheless accepted. It was one of the wisest moves I ever made.

The new job, though still full time, did not exhaust me like the old one did. When I went to school in the evening after work, my energy level was still high. I soon added classes during the weekend. In fact I took so many classes, including summer courses, that I was able to graduate four years after I left high school just like other college-bound students. Not only that, but my grades were high enough to allow me to attend graduate school on scholarship.

At 21 years old, I felt fully grown up. Adding to that feeling was my recent marriage and a child on the way. Despite my youth I was prepared for it with a college degree and a few years of work experience under my belt. My salary kept going up during that time. With all this happening I did not give up my educational pursuits, though I slowed down somewhat. It would take me twice as long to get my graduate degree as a full-time student. But I succeeded. That’s how committed I was to learning.

Before marriage and the arrival of my first son, I might have had the option of ending employment and devoting all my time to being a student. But that was no longer possible. I did the best I could in balancing home, work and education. It was a busy life but I somehow managed. I had wondered what it would be like to be able to devote myself full time to education. To have no need to work to maintain a home and family.

When I got to prison, I found out. Most of the inmates there had no interest in pursuing their education because of the negative experiences they had in high school. I understood that feeling. Had I not encountered the freedom I found in college, I would have felt the same. But now I had a different view. I wanted to study, I wanted to learn, and I wanted to create during my incarceration. What could stop me except a lack of willpower or drive to succeed? Who would dare put a roadblock in my path? Certainly not prison staff. They were part of the “corrections” profession. Even if some of them didn’t take their jobs seriously with that in mind, I would remind them.

Over the years as I labored to increase my knowledge and skills in prison, I sometimes said to a staffer reluctant to assist or at least get out of my way, “I’m trying to leave here a better person than when I came in.” They would usually get the message that their reputation if not their job would be on the line if enough of us failed. I never bothered to tell them that I thought I was a pretty good person and a contributing member of society before prison. Or that the
accusations against me that brought me to jail were false, that my conviction was due to a faulty trial, an unscrupulous prosecutor, and a political judge. I told the “corrections officers” none of this. The more they thought I was a dangerous person, the greater likelihood they would leave me alone. The more they felt I was in need of improvement so I would not be a threat upon my release to the community—their community—the more they would be inclined to leave me to my learning. They didn’t want to have to point the finger at themselves if their family was harmed at my hands when I stepped into freedom. Better to leave me in my delusion of seeing the prison compound as a college campus. Perhaps something good would come of it. They recognized I was old enough to have some sense of what I was doing. And I treated everyone in prison with respect.

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One thing I had going for me in contrast to most of my convicted compatriots was a firm belief in my innocence. In that I never wavered. As a result, I didn’t feel I needed to be punished in any way.

Early in my prison stay I realized that my body would not suffer from the experience. If anything it would improve due to exercise and the balanced diet I was getting. Every prison employs a nutritionist to make sure that the food served is adequate and healthy. It’s in their self interest to avoid the cost of health care for sick inmates or lawsuits by angry ones. I saw the results of solid food and sustained exercise as soon as I arrived in prison. The inmates were in much better shape than the staff who guarded them. How can this opportunity to lead a healthier and longer life be called punishment?

It was a mind game, I concluded. Like telling a child he’s bad and putting him in a corner. In prison there are a lot of people in corners. In a typical prison, more than 1,000. As a result, they don’t feel lonely or alienated. There are lots of “bad” boys there, and each has an interesting story to tell. No one will ever get bored listening to inmates converse. Even their lies are fascinating.

Punishment comes from guilt: the feeling that they screwed up in some way; didn’t pull off their crimes correctly; were careless in getting caught; didn’t have a better lawyer; pled guilty for a lower sentence instead of chancing a trial that could have got them off completely. On this last point, almost everyone pleads guilty instead of going to trial. Even the innocent do. They know that innocence isn’t enough to win a trial. Unless you can afford a good legal team, you’re going to be out-gunned and out-maneuvered by the
government. A trial is like two armies meeting on a battlefield. The outcome will be determined by the strength of each, not the nobleness of a cause.

It helps to be innocent at trial, of course. But that in itself won’t win the day. There is always some evidence against a defendant or the police would not have made an arrest. A jury will usually reach the same conclusion. They want to believe that the men and women with badges, who carry guns and are sworn to protect them, do not make mistakes. There is a strong presumption of guilt about anyone brought into court and put on trial. The jury can almost see the horns on the man or woman sitting at the defense table. And if the defendant takes the witness stand, the jury can almost see the defendant’s nose growing while talking.

Choosing to plead guilty instead of going to trial can be looked upon as a rational decision. But the self-loathing that is experienced later after making such a decision can be great. Could I have gotten off? Would the jury have believed my innocence? Am I a coward for not exercising my constitutional right to go to trial?

Nobody wants to arrive in prison with such a guilty state of mind. But most do. As a result, their punishment is harsh and unrelenting. They will have no way to escape it because the punishment comes from within. Like an apple with a worm deep within it, they will begin to rot from the inside out. No amount of polishing, be it exercise or balanced eating, will change the disintegration. They will have met their worst enemy in themselves.

When I looked at myself I saw a man who was either too smart or too stupid to put expedience before principle. Thinking back to that first gaze of self reflection, the word stupidity would probably most apply. Not that I made the wrong decision in turning down the misdemeanor plea of probation and going to trial. Only that I did so without grasping the consequences. I thought that if I lost and went to prison, I would become a martyr. But a martyr has to suffer, and I did no such thing during my 10 years of “forced retirement.” I soon learned to live with it realizing that my mandated lifestyle would add to rather than detract from my physical well-being. Eventually I came to embrace it. Throughout those years I didn’t suffer depression and never had a need for medication of any kind.

While I avoided suffering in prison, my family did not. They were stigmatized. In the beginning, they were frustrated by not being able to help me. They couldn’t help because there was nothing to do. I was living independently with support from fellow inmates. I didn’t even take my family’s money. Why buy junk at the canteen when I
didn’t need it. Unhealthy snacks are for people who are unhappy. That didn’t apply to me.

I’m sorry I didn’t show more sensitivity to the feelings of my family. But what could I do to change them? Lie to them? Tell them I was miserable when I was not? Say that prison is dangerous when it isn’t? Promise that I would punish myself, in the manner of other inmates, when there was no reason to do so? They knew more than others that I was innocent. Their long-term knowledge and understanding of me gave them insight into my ethics and honesty far more than any jury could perceive.

If only I had been guilty of something. Then I would have apologized to my family and the world, and taken my medicine. They would be angry but would eventually get over it. But how can an honest person who risked everything—indeed I had expected that prison would be hardship and torture—suddenly become dishonest to those who mean the most to him? I could not.

My smarter fellow inmates, even the harmless drug defendants who also felt no guilt, sought to preserve family ties at all costs. They fabricated and exaggerated prison conditions, always with the thought of getting sympathy, of allowing themselves to be looked down upon. They became the fall guys, if not the bad guys. Let their family patronize them. Anything as long as they remained in their corner.

But I couldn’t bring myself to doing this, to playing this standard prisoner game. Perhaps it was my pride. Or my stubbornness. Or maybe I secretly despised my family for not doing more to help me prove my innocence, although I don’t know what they could have done. Whatever the reason, I opted to tell the truth when I got to prison, and damn the consequences. I would tell it like it is. Hold my head up and pull no punches. Had I been a physician, I would have had a lousy bedside manner.

Still, though losing my family, I succeeded in saving myself. When I saw my family slipping away I resolved more than ever to return a success when my release occurred. I would use my time to prepare for that day. Not only would I acquire new skills, but I would break new ground. I would accumulate valuable treasures with the creative projects I planned to complete. Each one would have deep value for me. Perhaps on the outside I would find an enthusiastic market for them, even a lucrative one for some.

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My Uncle Willy served in World War II. He wanted to come back with newfound strengths and riches. In this he succeeded handsomely.

Willy had married my mother’s younger sister Rose, who died in 2008. Her mother, my grandmother, who raised me in the absence of my working mother, was born 120 years earlier in 1888. As a family, we go back a long way. Willy died before his wife, who was the last of my mother’s three sisters and two brothers to perish. Thanks to Willy and the things he brought back from the war, Rose was also the most prosperous.

My uncle had a dangerous assignment for a G.I. in a war where casualties were relatively light for us late-coming Americans. He followed the Germans in their retreat as a scout for the army. That meant he drove his jeep into towns the Germans were abandoning. The places had been strongholds for them but, in the wake of shelling, air bombings and advancing U.S. armies, they cleared out in a hurry. Aerial reconnaissance confirmed that the Germans had left a town and were on the road moving away from it. But Willy and his team had to go in to make sure.

The first thing they did was drive their jeep to the outskirts of the town, choosing the highest point so they could survey it with binoculars. They were looking for signs of remaining Germans. Usually, there were none since, unlike the Japanese, the Germans didn’t believe in suicide missions. But Willy had to make sure. No one wanted to see thousands of American soldiers marching into a town only to fall into a trap. Better that only Willy and his fellow scouts be sacrificed.

On one occasion, they saw a German tank in an alley in a town. It was probably a disabled vehicle that the Germans couldn’t drive away with them. But Willy didn’t want to take chances. He called his commander on the radio to order that heavy artillery pummel the town. It was a tough decision for Willy to make. For one thing, the town contained a lot of civilians trying to escape the war by hiding in their homes; many would be killed. For another, the pummeling would deny Willy the opportunity to visit the more elegant houses in the town that served as German headquarters. He inspected these buildings ostensibly to grab remaining Germans. But in reality there was something else he sought to grab. These dwellings often contained expensive jewelry, silverware or some other precious metal that the Germans had looted and left behind in their haste. Willy and his partners scooped up these treasures and kept them hidden in their personal belongings until the war was over.
When Willy returned to America he had money to invest in his future. He did so wisely, purchasing property in New York City and building a gas station on it. He spent the next 40 years as its owner and manager, employing immediate and extended family members in the auto repair section of the gas-selling enterprise. It made a good profit, allowing Willy, his wife and family to live in comfort. Such would not have been possible without his start-up capital. And the capital would not have been acquired except for the war.

My own start-up capital obtained in prison would be the creative projects I undertook. Unlike my Uncle Willy, these would be the product of my own hands and mind. Yet I shared with my Uncle the dangers I would have to take in acquiring them.

Because prison is a place where you’re supposed to be a follower rather than an innovator, I got into trouble with the staff often. Sometimes it happened when I wrote pieces that were unflattering to the prison or to politicians that the staff admired. Sometimes prison personnel found my writing when searching through my possessions for contraband. They didn’t find drugs or weapons that could damage anyone’s body, so they focused on things they believed could hurt someone’s mind. Seeing so much original writing in my possession, they sometimes read it to make an evaluation. Always with an eye toward whether I would be allowed to keep it. I politely pointed out to the more aggressive officers that I had a constitutional right to compose whatever I pleased. Most of them accepted that, a few tested me. “We need to know whether you’re writing any plans that could help someone escape from here.” In only one instance did they actually confiscate something. They said it demonstrated “disrespect” for some of the more rigid staff members and could “incite a riot” if it got into the wrong hands.

I had to hide a smile as they walked away with it. Not only did I have a backup copy but I knew this was a matter tailor-made for ACLU lawyers. I gleefully wrote the local chapter and got a quick and positive response. A lawyer from the group called the prison to threaten a lawsuit if my writing wasn’t returned. The warden himself handed it back to me as a silent officer who had presided over the confiscation sheepishly looked on. “Look it over and make sure it’s complete,” the warden said politely. I did and it was.

I wasn’t always so fortunate as I accumulated my creative treasures in preparation for release. At Hamilton Correctional Institution in Florida, I was caught red-handed breaking a prison rule. Put in the hole, I sat there until a “disciplinary transfer” to another
prison was arranged. That’s how I ended up in a prison with many lifers. Seasoned men with so little to lose that the officers let them alone. Interfering with someone doing creative writing and music composition was the least of their worries.

Hamilton C.I. didn’t have much going for it but as long as I had paper and a pen, I was happy. As with every other prison, there were educational classes for inmates. One held great attraction for me. It was a class in computer literacy. The year was 1994 and personal computers were rapidly becoming affordable and versatile. I signed up and experienced one of the greatest learning experiences in my life. The course was taught by a most capable and committed computer professional named William Gibson. He had been a success on the outside operating his own computer company. How he came to occupy a modest paying prison teaching job is an interesting story. Gibson had decided to devote his life to men who were struggling to make something of themselves. The decision followed the traumatic event of his son committing suicide.

No doubt out of guilt, he put himself in prison. There Gibson was valued by inmates. After six months in his class, they had employable skills. If they wanted to continue their learning, he’d turn them into teacher aides. He had more than a dozen.

When I entered the class, I got a bonus I didn’t expect. I spent the first few weeks with a computer program that taught me how to touch type. It was a prerequisite for the course. I could not have been more pleased. For a writer, knowing how to type is critical. After a time, my fingers flew over the keyboard. I then realized that I belonged in prison. To have considered myself a writer without knowing how to type was nothing short of being criminal.

After finishing the computer course, including learning all about word processing and how to use it to expedite and enhance my writing, I had one more challenge. How could I get hold of a computer in prison to do my writing? The answer came when I approached Gibson about writing a book dealing with the success of his course. “It will help motivate people in the class and attract others to enroll,” I said. Impressed with a writing sample I gave him, he went along with my offer and helped me secure a spare computer in another wing of the education building. There I would have privacy and solitude to write, a rare treat in prison.

Unfortunately I didn’t keep my word about what I would be writing. At least not immediately. I had a novel in my head that I wanted to transfer to paper first. It was about some of the worst people I encountered in prison, both inmates and staff. Being fiction, I took liberties to exaggerate. Including a lot of naughty words that
came out of my characters’ mouths. My goal was to finish this book and then do the one promised to Gibson.

I never got that far. One day my cell was searched and a floppy disk in which my novel in progress was stored was found. It didn’t matter what was on it since I didn’t have permission to have a disk. It was “state property.” When its contents were inspected, the proof was overwhelmingly against me; this was a piece of personal writing that I was doing instead of a school project for which I had received the computer. I never got the disk back; I also spent time in the hole.

It didn’t matter since I had a duplicate of the writing stashed away, as I always did. Also, being an experienced prisoner, I knew how to be productive in the hole, even though at Hamilton no books were permitted there. “I’m working on my appeal,” I lied, “and I need my legal materials, plus paper and pen and my dictionary.” Inmates were always working on their appeal so staff went along with my demand. What they didn’t know was that mixed in my legal papers were my creative writings and songs I needed to edit and expand.

When I returned to the compound, I never used a computer at Hamilton again. A permanent mark was made on my record that warned staff that I could not be trusted with a computer; to prohibit me from getting access to one. But that was to be short lived. After finishing my novel in the reliable manner that Shakespeare used—with pen and paper—I proceeded to write the book I had promised Gibson. But he didn’t want to see it; the staffers who had apprehended me for the disk “misuse” warned him to keep his distance from me. Better, he felt, to sacrifice my ego in order to preserve his class, always at risk of being shut down like any other educational program in prison.

But I persisted. I would be marketing my work on the outside. Why not start here? I found a way to get it to him. But it didn’t get the reaction I sought. I was again put in the hole, this time for attempting to “fraternize” with a staff member. Whatever Gibson told them, it was not in my favor. Not in the short run. But the longer term proved very beneficial.

I got a disciplinary transfer and ended up in a prison far more supportive of my creative endeavors than the place I left. It was Cross City C.I., where the lifers were, many of them good writers or superb musicians. Their years of hard work behind bars showed. These guys who ran the prison admired my seriousness, as well as how I arrived there. With their advice and guidance I knew I was in good hands.

One day I was tipped off about the note in my record that told staff to keep me away from computers. I didn’t realize this mark
against me would follow me to the new prison where I hoped to again get access to a computer. I managed to get one but I had to use a different strategy for that to happen. I took a plumbing course at the prison, then stayed on as a teacher’s aide. That gave me a computer for my own use. Typically, I edited and typed only one memo a month for the teacher, using the rest of my time to compose and type massive amounts of my own writing. He never bothered to look at what I was doing, too busy in his adjoining room playing games on his own computer. Trusted and knowledgeable lifers—my friends—were teaching the class.

During the second half of my 10-year sentence, I lived in a federal prison, mostly at FCI Petersburg. There I decided to get more serious about the focus of my writing. My goal more than ever was to return to the free world as a success. While I had no way of knowing for sure what would appeal to outsiders, I knew what my own needs were. I wanted to create works that were inspiring and positive. No more looking at the dark side of prison, with or without embellishment. Let me leave with a smile on my face and with music in my heart.

I had no illusions of what I would be up against when I faced the outside world. Not many prisoners have yellow ribbons waiting for them on the outside. There would be none for me. In my research on returning prisoners I was amazed at all the obstacles they encountered, even when they had ended up in prison through no fault of their own. A particularly revealing book I read dealt with concentration camp inmates during the Nazi era. The ones who survived returned to their children, who had often been harbored in sympathetic countries such as America. But the parents got an icy reception from their kids. Having grown up without their fathers and mothers present, the children were often hostile upon seeing them. The parents were an embarrassment because of their impoverished appearance and ex-prisoner status. Only years later did these Holocaust survivors get the support and recognition they deserved.

I was not in their league, of course; American prisons are no concentration camps. Still, the challenge of connecting with my family upon my return was real.

If I couldn’t reach my loved ones with words, perhaps I could touch them with music. I proceeded to write a collection of tunes called “Songs of Hope and Healing.” They ranged from themes of loyalty to the beauty of love and friendship. Some were humorous since I knew that laughter is effective in healing wounds. Others were pleading songs, always pointing the way to a positive outcome.
There were fast tunes and slow ones, rock songs and reggae, soul and country, blues and jazz. Something for everyone.

The process of writing these songs proved very therapeutic for me. They put me in a frame of mind that made me feel better than ever about myself. They also allowed me to see the possibilities for renewal and forgiveness in the world. I hoped I could get other people to sing them, or at least listen to me sing them.

Even the plays and screenplays I wrote had positive themes. They demonstrated that seemingly insurmountable obstacles can be overcome. I hoped that when I returned to the free world other people would share my view. Whatever the future held for me, I knew that keeping my optimism alive was imperative. If I had no faith in the course of events, how could I expect other people to be positive and compassionate toward me?

In addition to envisioning a life on the outside devoted to the creative expression of the arts, I wanted more. Just as my existence in prison had a balance to it, my goal was to continue such equilibrium on the outside. What particularly interested me in that regard was community service. The vehicle that I saw for doing that was the Prisons Foundation and the Safe Streets Arts Foundation, which I began in prison with the help of people on the outside. I got to know these outsiders mostly through correspondence. The nonprofit organizations would help men and women use the arts in prison for rehabilitative and therapeutic purposes.

To prepare myself to help others upon my release, starting with the inmates left behind, I made a concerted effort to engage in community service on the inside. I considered myself a missionary of sorts, but not one determined to convert anyone to a particular belief. Whatever goal a person stated as his creative objective, I accepted. It didn’t matter whether it was art, music or writing. I did what I could to help my fellow prisoners achieve success. Because I was so busy creating myself, I did not have a great deal of time to spare. Still, I gave an hour each day, seven days a week. It may not seem a lot, but I did it consistently. That made me reliable and available. I enjoyed it greatly. Why wouldn’t I when it gave me a window into the lives of others? They trusted me to help them create, and I never let them down by failing to deliver my best. It was so pleasurable and exciting that I thanked them sincerely for allowing me to assist them. Of course they thanked me too. As a sign of my sincerity, I never accepted compensation for my efforts, not even the smallest gifts. Such things as candy bars purchased at the canteen were offered. But I always politely refused. Soon I had a much-admired reputation. “Sobin don’t take nothin’ from no one.”
A person can accomplish a lot in an hour a day helping others, particularly if he’s consistent, positive and humble. Sometimes I acted as little more than a cheerleader. A book manuscript would be presented to me and I would review it. I told the author its strong points, always saying that it was my opinion so I wouldn’t give false hope. On the other extreme, I occasionally did re-writes of material handed me. That was when the writing was short and served a specific, important purpose. Such as a letter to a judge in which a prisoner asked for a reduction of a sentence. As far as I know, my letters of this type never succeeded. But they served as good therapy for the inmates. On one occasion we wrote a letter to a judge before he made a probation decision about an inmate. Our letter swayed the judge to grant it. That happened early in my sentence when I was still at Lorton, before the beginning of the prison building boom across America. Many judges then still had mercy in their hearts instead of get-tough rhetoric in their mouths.

A lot of the letters I helped inmates write went to family members. These sometimes succeeded in getting the desired results. An angry parent, a distraught child, a questioning spouse; they were all grist for diplomatic, reassuring communication. I wished I had someone to help me with the letters I wrote to my own family who abandoned me after my mother died. But how do you communicate with a lawyer son and fiercely competitive sister with so much baggage in tow?

I’m not a painter or a visual artist of any type. But if I ever wind up with another lengthy sentence, I intend to become one. My admiration of artists in prison was and still is great. Whether they work with oils, acrylics, pen, pencil, crayon, watercolor, make-shift paints that use pigments found in spinach, coffee and other foods, or the colors found in candies, I salute their work. Such men and women understand that “one picture is worth a thousand words.” Their renderings often tell elaborate and heart-wrenching stories. They let people know, including those who mean the most to them, that beauty and meaning can be found anywhere, including prison. That they are alive and striving to achieve self-realization through their art.

I couldn’t do much to help the visual artists except look at their creations and make encouraging comments. Sometimes works in progress would be shown to me. If I was asked for my opinion at that point, I would express it. For example, if an artist was drawing an historic scene, he might ask me if additional subjects should be included. “Do you think I should put a bodyguard in the picture with President Kennedy, or do you think that would make it too crowded?”
I always stated the positive and negative side of each option that was available when such a question was presented to me. That way the artist would make his own decision.

There were occasional art shows in prison where the art of inmates was shown. On some occasions I provided background guitar music. When I got out of prison this became a specialty of mine. My classical repertoire seemed to lend itself well to art openings.

While visual artists were outside my area of expertise, I found I could help others more directly. Performing artists came to me for instruction and guidance. In the beginning, this was a mutual learning experience. They showed me songs and techniques on the guitar, and then I showed them some. At a prison called Calhoun Correctional Institution in Florida, we were allowed to have our own guitars. That made mutual learning easier. When I was transferred to Hamilton C.I., I was devastated to find that personal guitars were not allowed. We had to use three prison guitars. That’s all they had for the thousand-plus inmates there. And there were dozens of us who played. We came up with a plan that proved workable. It also had an unanticipated bonus.

To get a guitar you had to go to the rec field and stand on line at a shed where the guitars were distributed. Some of the more serious players, of which I considered myself one, formed a collective. When one of us was successful in obtaining a guitar, we’d share it with others in our group. We’d sit on the ground in a circle and pass the guitar around. There was a lot of grass but no trees at Hamilton C.I. Seven or eight of us waiting patiently, each man took a turn playing a song. The rest of us listened. I don’t think I’ve ever been in a situation where I learned so much. It proved the adage that a person can learn more by listening than by talking, or playing. That greater knowledge comes from observing rather than by showing off. Certainly that’s true if you’re playing something you already know. At Hamilton I learned how serious I was about music. As we sat in a circle one day, one of the men made an unusually generous gesture. He pulled out a marijuana cigarette, lit up and passed it around.

When you smoke pot in prison you take a chance that you will fail a urine test. They are administered to inmates randomly, though only occasionally. Failing one means that you’ll go to the hole. That in itself isn’t much punishment since you get everything you need there, plus the bonus of privacy. But it cuts you off from guitars. That’s why I thought at least a few of the men in the circle wouldn’t smoke the joint. But I was wrong. Everyone participated with the exception of me. I didn’t want it because the music itself made me high.
By the time I arrived at Cross City C.I., my last stop in the Florida gulag system, I was ready to undertake the learning of advanced guitar techniques. Fortunately I had arrived at the right place for that. In all my travels in prisons before and after Cross City, I never found so many great musicians or a larger variety and quantity of instruments. Two inmate musicians in particular, Cedric Davis and Marshall Dunbar, took me under their wings. From Cedric, a concert musician before imprisonment who had extensive music training, I learned theory. Marshall, who played for decades in prison, taught me technique. They were both superb players and terrific teachers.

My time at Cross City prepared me for my next musical challenge as I finished my five-year state sentence and prepared to begin my consecutive five-year federal one. All because I wouldn’t plead guilty to a misdemeanor and accept probation for a crime I didn’t commit.

It didn’t matter now because I was well beyond grieving. The beautiful music I heard from others and the sounds I was starting to produce on my own drowned out any sorrow. The timing of my arrival in federal prison could not have been better. I had already acquired the musical knowledge and ability to advance on my own. Which was a good thing because there were few musicians in federal prison from which I could learn. I had advanced that far. Still, I had a long way to go before I reached the level where I wanted to be. Five years to be exact.

During that time, I learned mostly on my own. An outside musician, Paul Bartsch, who came to play at the prison chapel, was a big help. He gave me tips and furnished me with materials. I only saw him once or twice a week, but they were important meetings. Also, my friend and fellow inmate musician, Lee Amirault, showed me things I didn’t know. But he wasn’t at the level of Cedric or Marshall. Then Lee left after winning his appeal and I had no one to collaborate with on music. Finally, Steve Andrew arrived in prison with his award winning guitar skills. We recorded our CD together, Prison Tracks.

Between Lee and Steve there was a gap that I sought to fill by increasing my commitment to community service. I taught a group guitar lesson that attracted over 20 inmates, all fascinated with the guitar. To accommodate them, I established two groups of 10 men each. Since there were only 11 government-furnished guitars on the compound, such a division was necessary. One of the reasons I attracted so many students was that I promised to use a teaching method that would allow them to play songs at the very first session. And to have many songs under their belt in a matter of weeks. To
accomplish this I developed a curriculum of my own invention. I realized that if it worked well in prison, I’d have something I could market on the outside after my release.

My quick-learning method of instruction was based on tuning a guitar in an unconventional way. It’s called “open tuning.” Some professionals use it, including Ritchie Havens and the Rolling Stones. They do it to get a full sound. It’s usually not taught to beginners because it tends to simplify an instrument that is complex, particularly when playing sophisticated classical or jazz music. But most people who take up the guitar don’t plan to go that far. In fact, most professional performers don’t go that far.

Sadly, most people who take up the guitar quit in discouragement. I didn’t want that to happen in prison. Inmates have a background of failure. I didn’t want to pile more on them. I also knew that they wouldn’t have much time to practice because they couldn’t have their own guitars. They could only get hold of a guitar when the rec yard was open and then only if others didn’t grab it first. The easier I made learning, the higher the success rate.

The hardest part of learning to play guitar is being able to tune it. Players of horns and keyboards do not have to concern themselves with tuning. But since tuning must be mastered to play guitar, why not do it in the open tuning style so that playing will be easier? If a person is just beginning on guitar, let him or her tune in a way to play songs quickly. It made sense to me then and it still does. That’s how I was able to promise my students that they would progress smoothly. It’s the reason so many signed up for the course. They trusted me. After all, I was an inmate like them. In prison, if a person doesn’t have a good reputation, he doesn’t have anything. They had confidence in me.

I had given the matter of instruction much thought. So much that I wrote a manual to use for the course. I called it, *How to Play Guitar like a Pro in a Few Easy Lessons*. And I meant it.

With my connections in prison and the widespread enthusiasm about the course, the manual was printed and spiral bound at the prison printing plant. I even included my personal copyright notice in the front of it. That’s how proud I was of my creation. There were more than enough copies for everyone in the class, with plenty left over for future sessions.

The classes went well. From the very first day everyone was playing a song. They were motivated to learn and soon their dream of becoming versatile guitar players was realized. At the last session we had a final exam. It consisted of each person getting in front of the class and performing a song of his own choosing. Some of the
students had written their own tunes for the occasion. Everyone passed with flying colors. No grades were given, only applause. At the end of each inmate’s song the response was positive and heartfelt.

One of the students set to be released soon was particularly happy about his new skill. “I have a wife,” he said, “who works as a singer in coffee houses. I’ll now be able to accompany her.” I told him he was good enough to do it. It was true.

I wasn’t sure what I would do after release with my manual and a related book I wrote on how to easily play melodies on guitar. I had a vague notion that I would see if a music publisher might be interested in them. But I never got around to it and for a long time I had no plans to use them for teaching. That changed six years after my release. By then I had achieved national success, having established the Prison Art Gallery and produced and performed in shows at the Kennedy Center. But I lacked a local community service project to help me ward off efforts by my hateful son and envious sister—both in positions of influence—to put me back in prison. Establishing a guitar orchestra composed of seniors and low-income beginning guitarists who could use my manual and instruction method seemed a perfect opportunity. What better way to assist others while helping myself avoid another unjustified term in prison?
Chapter 5

Surviving Discrimination, Homelessness and Probation Officers

I come from a family that boasts independence among its members. My parents lived in New York where my sister and I were born and raised. But she and I both left the area to put down roots far away from New York. My sister relocated to Hawaii, a place she fell in love with when she honeymooned there with her first husband. I went to D.C. in an effort to get rid of corrupt and exploitative politicians. Unfortunately, they got rid of me first.

When I emerged from 10 years in prison in January 2003, I thought about what my mother had said to me once. “Our family is like birds who leave the nest and fly to distant places.” Because of my son’s and my sister’s antagonism toward me, I didn’t have great interest in seeing them upon my return. They had proved that we were birds of a very different feather. All I wanted was to go back to the nest for a while, as my late mother suggested in her letters. But the nest was hurriedly sold by my sister after my lawyer-son broke his promise to safeguard it for me. Gone also was my inheritance and savings, my own money. My sister, with my son’s support and participation, had picked them clean.

During my last few years in, visits from my son and sister stopped as my mother grew elderly and then terminally ill. Then began their angry letters referring to revived or invented family quarrels. Their intentions were clear. They wanted to remove me from homestead and family wealth. The fact that my mother had other intentions, that she wrote me hopeful letters until the end, didn’t matter to my skillful and deceptive offspring and sibling.

I didn’t want to be included in my mother’s will directly because I remained incarcerated. It was likely that funds I would receive would be confiscated by the government. My son and I therefore agreed on other methods of handling my savings, inheritance and the family home. These methods depended on the honesty and trustworthiness of him and my sister, which proved nonexistent. The last letters that I sent to my mother while she was in my sister’s care in the final stages of cancer were intercepted and destroyed by my sister. My son, during the brief time we were in therapy together after my release, told me so.

Knowing I would eventually take my son and sister to court if they did not account for the missing funds, they took the initiative and
brought me to court first. Even before I got out of prison I was served with legal papers by my son. He sought a stay away order against me because I had said I would contact him to find out about the whereabouts of the funds upon my release. He also called the warden of my prison to encourage him to keep me there longer. I was set to go to a halfway house, but due to my son’s intervention, I was denied. The rejection came only a few days before I was set to leave prison. Had it not been rescinded I would have left prison in 2002 rather than in 2003.

My son also sent a summons requiring me to appear in court when I returned to D.C. He had scheduled a hearing to get his stay away order against me. I came to the hearing in a good mood despite my having to live in a homeless shelter upon release. There was no other option without funds. I was happy because the shelter was a step up from prison. There was no lock on the door to keep me from leaving each day. With my guitar I was able to play away my blues whenever and wherever the mood struck. Talk about being a troubadour.

I brought it with me when I came to court to face my son. As we waited for the judge to enter, I played it softly for him. The bailiff said I could do that. “As long as the judge isn’t on the bench,” he said, “you can get up and dance in the aisle for all I care.” Unfortunately there was no one to dance with. My son did not respond to the music in the least. He was a man on a mission. Representing himself, no attorney came with him. It was a mistake that he wouldn’t make again. Months and years of court proceedings followed, almost all of them at his or my sister’s instigation. He orchestrated all of them. A lawyer joke was unfolding before my eyes: father helps put son through law school, son uses law education to cheat father, and when father seeks return of funds taken from him by son, son drags father into court under threat of jailing.

But on this first day in court, I was happy to be this close to him and pleased that he had come alone. The possibility of communication was in the air. As Judge Lynn Liebowitz took the bench, a long-awaited discourse began. My son gave a stirring oration about the flaws of his father and the nuisance he said I had become. I could hardly recognize myself. My Uncle Phil, the poet and philosopher of our family, once said, “Children never fully grow up as long as their parents are alive.” My son in his acerbic ramblings was proving it.

Unfortunately for him, Judge Liebowitz was paying closer attention to his words of scorn than I was. She interrupted his tirade to warn him that his extreme un-provable statements against me were
unbecoming to a lawyer and not serving the cause of justice. “May I remind you,” she said, “that as an attorney you are an officer of the court and I expect you to behave accordingly.”

There is a saying that a person who represents himself, whether he is a lawyer or not, has a fool for a client. My son was proving the truth of this. When he got through with his maddening monologue, the judge further admonished him. “What I see before me,” she said as she shook her head, “is a father and son matter. I don’t see that the court has any business being involved in it.” At my son’s request, the hearing was put off for 10 days so he could have a lawyer represent him.

When the new court date came, he stood before Judge Liebowitz with an attorney. The judge advised the attorney to try to settle the matter out of court, something I was more than willing to do. We reached an agreement that my son and I would communicate with each other through a professional mediator. There would be two sessions, spaced a month apart from each other. If we needed more, we would have them as long as my son and I agreed to continue.

The two sessions went well. My son had a lot on his mind that he needed to convey. Most of his thoughts dealt with matters that his mother, my ex-wife, had said to him about me. They dealt with allegations of abuse towards her. I was surprised that my son had taken them seriously. When he was visiting and writing me in prison, he said that he was discounting the statements his mother was making about me. In one letter he wrote, “It’s scary how much hatred and anger she feels. When she gets in her hate mood, I have to keep her away from your grandchildren.” Speaking of my son’s two boys, his letters to me indicated that my relationship with them was good, despite separation due to my imprisonment. I sent the boys gifts, including books I thought they would enjoy. My son wrote that they read them often. On one visit he brought the entire family. All of this occurred while my mother was alive. I still treasure the letters he, my mother and my sister sent me during that time.

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The mediator, whom my son’s highly professional and compassionate lawyer arranged for us to see, was a trained therapist. My son and I split the cost. By then I was making money playing music. Not enough to move out of the shelter but I was able to cover my half of the mediator’s fee and other expenses I was incurring.

The two sessions went well, with my son doing most of the talking. That was fine with me because I wanted to understand his
thinking, which I saw was muddled. If I didn’t know better, I would have thought that he had just exited 10 years in prison instead of me. Only during the second session did we discuss the money due me, and only fleetingly. He said cryptically about his aunt, my sister, “I thought she could be trusted dad.” I answered, “I guess we were wrong.” What I didn’t say was that I thought I could trust you too. Or refer to one of his last angry letters to me while I was in prison. In it he said he was turning his back on me and my financial situation, which he estimated would cause me to lose “a million dollars” as my share of the inheritance.

Instead of asking further about the money during the second session, I moved to other subjects that I knew were important to him. I was seeking common ground. The last thing I wanted him to think was that this was only about money. It wasn’t. There were principles involved certainly, but there were also family concerns I wanted to share with him. Our interaction was amicable but he rejected my suggestion that we meet informally over coffee occasionally to get reacquainted with each other. Instead he wanted time to think through everything. Six months to be exact. Then we would have a third session with the therapist, he said. We agreed that it would take place between Thanksgiving and Christmas. I reluctantly agreed.

I never looked forward to the holiday season more. In retrospect, I see he was using a lawyer’s tactic of delaying as much as possible. Not to mention playing with my emotions. I fit the pieces of the puzzle together years later when I attended a conference on elder abuse. There were presentations given, including a short dramatic sketch on how seniors are often exploited by their adult children. Much of the abuse surrounds money matters. The seniors have funds or are in line to get some that their children and younger siblings want. Their goal is to get the seniors out of the way so the money will fall into their hands. The children will withhold grandchildren from the seniors as leverage, just as my son was doing. My sister, five years younger than I, was withholding her love.

My 60th birthday, the first birthday I celebrated in freedom in 12 years, came on October 14, 2003. No card, call or token of remembrance arrived from either my son or my sister. I didn’t bring this up when I sent him a card and gift on his 38th birthday, October 20th. “Don’t say anything,” I figured, “we will have another face-to-face meeting with the therapist soon.”

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Meanwhile back at the homeless shelter, I was doing fine. In one sense it was a home for me very similar to my former prison home. It had bunk beds for residents of the same type used in some of the prisons where I resided. There was also “chow time” like prison; even count time, the latter taking place in the middle of the night when the outer doors were locked and all residents had to be present and accounted for. If you were absent, you wouldn’t go to the hole, nor would a search party and tracking dogs be sent to find and seize you. Just the opposite happened. Your name was crossed off the list of residents and your bed was given to someone else. Excused absences were the exception. Some of the residents who had been rejected by their families were gradually returning to them, spending a few nights a week at the family home. They notified the shelter in advance so their absences would be excused.

Most of us were there every night, having no other place to go. One man, older than I, slept in our 15 by 15 foot cubicle that held six bunk beds and 12 men. He was also on the outs with his family. He had a personality issue. Difficulty remembering things due to advanced Alzheimer’s. We shared something in common. His condition made him unacceptable to his loved ones. I had money due me, which made me, though not my money, unacceptable to mine.

Except for sleeping at the shelter, I spent little time there. All day and well into the evening, I endeavored to share my creative prison accomplishments with Washington in an effort to establish a reputation and get on my own financial feet. While I was still hopeful that my family would come to their senses and give me part or all of what was due me, I wasn’t holding my breath or my desire to live a full life. Despite my age, my interest in women had not subsided while I was in prison. I also wanted to explore and experience things on the music and theater scene. That didn’t mean I would spend an inordinate amount of time attending shows or attending to women. After all, life is more than clapping and copulating. Still, I had left prison in better physical and mental shape than when I went in. I now intended to live a little.

Most of my time was spent in self-employment. There was no pay initially, but I knew that this would change once I made the right connections. First off, I had to get my manuscripts and music in presentable shape. To do that I made arrangements with two establishments that would become my worksites. One was a university and the other was a church. At the university, there was a library open everyday from early morning until late at night. I was able to use a computer there to edit and type my manuscripts. It was laborious work but at the end of a few months I had three diverse
books prepared: a prison memoir, a novel and a nonfiction book. It was about American politics, in which I had participated by running for public office and advocating on behalf of the poor and disenfranchised.

To get my music in shape I found a church with a gospel band in need of a guitarist. I volunteered my services, not only playing but helping to connect the sound system and doing other tasks each Sunday morning. The members felt I was talented and they knew I was reliable, always being the first one to arrive. Joining this musical group was like being in a heavenly orchestra. The love and support given me were terrific. There were physical things provided too, including a new guitar, wardrobe and a certain attractive and unattached member of the group. Most importantly I had a place to practice and play, a place to refine my musical compositions. Since the church was active in community outreach, it was open much of the time.

But in a few instances when I got to the church I couldn’t get in. This led me to talk to the pastor about getting my own key. It was a bold move for me to make. I had only been out of prison less than 90 days after spending a decade with crooks and robbers. How could he trust me with the valuable things in the church and its adjoining offices? Still he knew something that others did not know. That I had gone to prison not for what I did, but for who I was. A political activist who would not compromise my principles for personal gain. A man who would not plead guilty to avoid going to prison for a crime he did not commit. I looked at the preacher while he considered my request. Then I said, “Look, I just spent ten years in prison for my honesty, not any dishonesty.” He nodded his head and gave me the key.

No one at the university or the church knew I lived in a homeless shelter. There was no reason to tell them. I showered daily and dressed in clean and varied clothing. I never hid my ex-prisoner status, however. I wore it like a badge of honor, just as Martin Luther King and Gandhi treated their arrests and imprisonments. Just as the disciples of Jesus treated their leader’s crucifixion.

On the other hand I didn’t flaunt it. At least, not usually. The exception was when I was marketing something I created in prison that had a unique prison flavor to it, for example, the CD that I had recorded with Steve Andrew in prison. During my first year out of prison, I arranged to have Prison Tracks pressed and packaged as a CD. The funds for doing that came from two supporters, Helen Thorne and Dona Pereira. Both women, residents of New York, had corresponded with and helped me while I was in prison. I had even
planned to marry Dona upon my release, but she couldn’t wait. She blamed me for writing letters to her that were so sexually stimulating that she had to find a bed partner before I became available. I felt bad about the loss. Still, her compliment of the effectiveness of my writing boosted my ego. We remained friends and she became a great aid to me both emotionally and financially when I formed the Safe Streets Arts Foundation.

During my first year out, I sold many copies of my CD. I used it as a fundraising tool for the nonprofit foundation that Helen, Dona, Jim Pruitt and I finally incorporated. Jim, a libertarian living in Florida, was shocked at the injustice of my trial there. He attended every day of it to see if the government had anything of substance on me. He concluded it did not and became a life-long friend. Since he traveled a long distance each day to attend the trial, on the last day I offered to fill his car tank with gas. He said no, but I insisted. “Look Jim, tomorrow I’ll either be in prison where I won’t need any money, or out free to make more.” The jury, more influenced by my unconventional background than my harmless behavior, returned a part-guilty verdict. It would be 10 years before I saw Jim again, but by then he became a computer whiz whose time and talent would help the Foundation grow. He even helped me acquire a laptop which I used at the shelter.

The success I was having with Prison Tracks in acquiring funds for our nonprofit organization and my personal expenses led me to produce a second CD, Christmas in Prison. I marketed it during the first holiday season I spent as a free man. I recorded the CD at the church using the equipment and expertise of our group’s drummer and sound engineer, Lisa Missenda. It included holiday favorites of men and women in prison and “those on the outside who care about them.” Of course I asked Jim, Helen and Dona their favorites so I could include them. I also checked with prominent activists in the criminal justice reform arena in which I was rapidly playing a significant role. They included Chuck Colson of Prison Fellowship Ministries, Julie Stewart of FAMM, Marc Mauer of the Sentencing Project and several others, including compassionate members of congress and the Mayor of Washington, DC. When completed, the album of my acoustic guitar instrumentals sold well. It also allowed me to get great paying jobs, including a year-long series at the high paying Old Post Office Pavilion stage. As with Prison Tracks, Christmas in Prison proved to be a good fund-raising vehicle for the Foundation.
My manuscripts were also making headway. I had literary agents and publishers interested in them. I opened my incoming emails and letters daily with much anticipation.

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There was also Sean Suber, my first probation officer, who did his job well. Sometimes, too well.

I wasn’t actually on probation. I did all my time in prison and the warden, much to my family’s regret, simply couldn’t keep me there any longer. When prisoners go to a halfway house, they can easily be sent back to prison for the smallest rule breaking. But my family had spared me that, an inadvertent blessing. In the halfway house I would have had to get a conventional job, putting my creative work on the sidelines. Avoiding that, I started my free world life as an artist and producer, and have remained true to that calling ever since.

Though I wasn’t on probation, I was on something called supervised release. It’s a light form of probation and is tacked onto virtually every sentence today. Mine was for three years. It didn’t mean that I would go back to prison for three years if I “violated” but that I would have to spend some time there. Fortunately Suber, for the most part, turned out to be reasonable and professional. He had trouble understanding how I could be content living in a homeless shelter after amassing considerable wealth before prison. But almost all of that money had gone to various social and political causes, with the exception of some personal savings in my mother’s keeping. Not that I lived in poverty before; only modestly, even during my highest grossing year when I earned over two million dollars in the specialty publishing and telephone conferencing fields. Almost all of that money was used to fight government censorship and morality-based legislation; It also went to pay for the widespread distribution of condoms and hypodermic needles to halt the spread of AIDS. That was in the 1980’s. When I returned home from prison, an old friend and fellow political activist, Bill Rice, spotted me. “Dennis, you were ahead of your time.” I smiled and nodded humbly saying “And I did 10 years in prison for it.” Indeed, my condom giveaways and safe sex materials were looked upon in the Bible Belt of Florida as “promoting immorality.” It formed the basis of the first two counts in my indictment of “racketeering.”

During my pre-prison period of high earnings and fearless advocacy, I got a great deal of publicity in both local and national media. Also, appearances on talk shows coast to coast. That included being a guest on The Oprah Winfrey Show. I also was featured on the
front page of the Wall Street Journal. I was known for my resources and high regard for civil liberties and individual freedom. I was often taunted for interacting with and sometimes participating in alternative lifestyles. I became the target of police harassment but I was never deterred from respecting and safeguarding the right of people to follow their own path to happiness. As Jane Austen once said, “Whatever people do is their own business as long as they don’t do it in the street where they can scare the horses.”

During one of Suber’s unannounced visits to my homeless shelter where a few of his “clients” were located, he asked me, “How can you live like this with all the money you once had?” He also noted how content I seemed. I said, “It was never about money, always about freedom.” I don’t think it sunk in immediately, but eventually it hit home. He just had to get to know me a little better. Freedom is something I greatly value for myself and for others. Even inside prison I pursued it by ignoring pressures to conform. Just as I had done on the outside.

At first Suber gave me a long leash. Then he started to reel it in. “As much as you like your music and other creative stuff,” he said, “you’re going to have to get a regular job sooner or later.” I looked at him squarely in the eyes and said, “I’d rather go back to prison first.” He then retreated. I could see that my returning to prison would be considered a failure for him. So I did something to satisfy both of us. From that time on, I complained about one ailment after another. So began a series of time-consuming medical tests. Three years passed before the numerous hospitals and doctors I visited would declare me fit to work.

Suber knew I was making some money from my music, CDs, writing and other endeavors, but I assured him it was going to the nonprofit group I had formed. Since I was still living at the homeless shelter, he didn’t question me. When he asked me to pay “something” to the court to chip away at the half million dollar fine that had been imposed on me, I agreed to five dollars per month. He was pleased, particularly when he saw how reliable I was in paying it. To friends and foes, and I believe that Suber fell into both groups, my word is absolute.

He didn’t know much about my whereabouts when I wasn’t at the homeless shelter, and he didn’t need to know. I didn’t even tell him I had a cell phone, although he eventually discovered it when my son spitefully gave him the phone number. I immediately changed it. “I thought you didn’t have a phone,” he said. “I don’t,” I answered, telling him it belonged to someone else and that I borrowed it from
time to time. Then I gave him proof: a payment receipt in Helen’s name.

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Christmas 2004 was coming. Would I be out of the shelter when it arrived? That would depend on the third mediation session with my son. I didn’t have enough money on my own to do it. I wanted to have at least a year’s rent money when I signed a lease so I would not have to choose between getting a job and getting evicted from my apartment if my income from my art fell off.

The shelter wasn’t pressuring me to leave, though it would have if the administrators didn’t value my presence there. I contributed my musical and production services for various projects they had. And I never charged them a cent. They reciprocated by bending their rule of a six-month maximum stay for residents. I could have my bed and locker there for as long as I wished.

They also knew about my family, and characterized my son and sister’s behavior as “disgusting.” They learned about it because my sister told them. Just as my son had contacted the warden of my prison to take adverse action against me, so had my sister called the shelter. Terri Bishop, the head of the shelter, told me about her conversation with my sister. “The call I got from her was disturbing. I don’t know how a younger sibling could feel the way she does. There’s something going on with her. She told me about what she called your bad character and your criminal convictions, one by one, in great detail. Of course we don’t care about that here. We know you to be a clean, sober, decent person who gets along with everyone and helps out whenever asked. But then she said something that did cause me concern. She said that you don’t need to be in a homeless shelter. That she’s holding a lot of money for you.”

I spoke calmly. “My sister said she’ll pay my rent if I get a conventional job, if I give up my dream of succeeding with my music and writing. I can’t do that, not even if I have to live on the street.” I didn’t add that my sister wanted me in a low-rent district, far from the heart of DC. The shelter was downtown, close to the Old Post Office Pavilion stage and many other theatrical and music venues I frequented.

“Yes, she told me she wanted you to live a normal life,” Bishop said. I frowned as she continued. “I don’t like it when a person tries to run another person’s life. You can stay here as long as you want.”
My sister was also in touch with Suber, telling him I was fit to work and that I should be sent back to prison if I didn’t. He told me that my sister was prepared to pay some of my expenses with the money that was due me so I could get on my feet. I asked him, “How do I talk to her about anything, when she doesn’t want me to contact her?” He answered, “That’s a good question.”

In fact, not having contact with my sister was a mutual decision. Her letters, emails and other messages were too painful for me to read. The last letter I sent her stated that a lawyer I knew in D.C., a long-time friend of our family, had offered to mediate the money issue between us. He politely wrote my sister to follow up on this offer. She responded with an unnecessarily angry, insulting and threatening letter to him. He gave me a copy and noted that my sister would be as difficult to deal with as my son, who he knew as a D.C. lawyer that clients had complained about. “Is your whole family crazy?” he asked. I didn’t respond. The man had a right to be upset.

Shortly after Thanksgiving, I called the mediator seeing my son and me to see about scheduling the third session. She asked me for dates that would be convenient and said she would get back to me after seeing which dates worked best for my son. She called me a week later to tell me that she couldn’t reach him, though she had tried and left several messages. Could I give her another week? I did. Still no results. He was clearly avoiding her, and me. I called his lawyer, whom I liked. He had worked out the mediation agreement and had showed me kindness in court, which I reciprocated. In a court hallway, out of view of my son, he offered me some nuts, which I gratefully accepted since we were missing lunch. A few days later I stopped by his office to hand his secretary a thank you note to give him, along with a large unopened can of deluxe nuts.

Hearing about my son’s subterfuge, he spoke to me on the phone with compassion and concern. Yes, he would find out from his client what was going on and he’d get back to me with a time for the third mediation session. When he called a few days later, he appeared shaken. He had spoken to my son but my son said he was too busy to meet with me. Perhaps in the new year—after Christmas—he would find the time.

So much for the possibility of having a non-homeless, family-oriented Christmas. Even in prison I had not felt as bad as I did at that moment. To overcome the disappointment, I thought about a scene from the Mel Brook’s comedy Blazing Saddles. In it, the main “good guy” cowboy meets another “good guy.” Both are dressed immaculately in white good-guy outfits. The original good guy says to the other “you used to be a lawyer and now you are a good guy?”
The other responds by saying that he had become one to heighten his stature in the community. When they meet again, the new good guy unexpectedly shoots the original one before the latter can get his gun out to defend himself. That’s clearly against the code of good guy ethics. “I thought you were a good guy,” the victim says as he grasps his gunshot wound. The response he gets: “For Christ’s sake, I’m a lawyer!”

After confronting my son’s Christmas lie and his increasingly bad treatment in the months and years that followed, I thought of an adaptation of the Mel Brooks movie. Same scene, different characters. “I thought you were my son.” “For Christ’s sake dad, I’m a lawyer!”

We went back to court again, this time at my initiation. I wanted to set a date for the third mediation session in Judge Liebowitz’s presence so my son couldn’t give me the run around again. I had had enough of emotional blackmail and financial exploitation. If my son and sister didn’t want me in their lives, that was their choice. But the money that was mine would not stay with them, if I could help it. Toss me away, but toss the money with me.

Judge Liebowitz was not to be found. A new judge had taken her place in family court, part of the rotation system of judges. He proved to be a disaster, a person given easily to prejudice and snap judgments. When he heard that I had been to prison for 10 years on serious-sounding charges, which my son’s two new lawyers fully enumerated, it was all over for me. Not only did this malevolent magistrate refuse to set a date for the third promised mediation session, but he granted my son’s lawyers request for a stay away order. They claimed my son was “fearful” of me.

At that point I had no choice but to file a lawsuit against my son and my sister for the stolen funds. When Suber heard about my filing he said to me without a trace of surprise in his voice, “What took you so long?”

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I celebrated the anniversary of my first year of freedom on January 6, 2004, still residing at the homeless shelter. Despite that, the future looked bright. I had flushed my son and sister out of the bushes to reveal them for what they were. Our future interaction would now be in a court, which suited me. The next time they lied to me, it would be in front of a judge, and then they would face perjury charges.
My church family and other circles of friends were growing. I spent Christmas in New York with acquaintances who lived there, a pleasant vacation which became an annual holiday excursion for me. It’s always nice to return to one’s place of birth to observe changes and relive old memories.

I knew I would have my own apartment in the near future. My artistic endeavors were being recognized and my resources were growing. My two CD’s were selling well, and I had more on the way. I also had a plan to market my written works, starting with my prison memoir. I would self-publish. While this is generally not recommended for authors, I felt I knew what I was doing, having done research and tested the waters. In the end my plan proved successful.

While in prison I had subscribed to Publishers Weekly, the trade magazine of the publishing world. The subscription cost $200 per year but was well worth it. I saw what books were being published and how they were being marketed. That’s when I came to realize that I could publish my own books as successfully as any small publisher.

I didn’t do that in the first year of my return to Washington because I wanted to see if I could attract a publisher. But that didn’t happen even though a few prominent literary agents expressed an interest in representing me. In the end they passed me up too. One agent who accepted me proved to be a phony. He wanted money for “expenses,” not much, but enough to send a red flag. When I Googled him, I found authors he had represented who registered complaints.

I came to the conclusion after my own marketing efforts that my books dealing with prison did not have the mass audience I had envisioned. Seeing the books as specialty items, I decided to publish them as such. Doing that meant putting a high price on them. All this I learned from Publishers Weekly.

The first book I published, my prison memoir, I priced at $75 per copy and marketed it to libraries. They could easily afford the cost. I didn’t publish it alone but rather as part of a book I put together called Prison Help Resource Guide. In addition to my memoir I included listings and descriptions of organizations that provided services to prisoners and their families, including my own Foundation. Included were organizations that send free books to prisoners, pen pal clubs, groups that dispense legal help and much more. I got all this information from the Internet and didn’t even have to retype it. Just cut and paste. After I packed the book with this material, it was hefty. I only had a few copies made at a small
photocopy shop, where I also had them spiral bound. After all, the book was untested and my storage space was limited. It didn’t look like a conventional book but rather like a specialty volume, which suited my purposes exactly.

Through further Internet research I found the email addresses of community and university libraries across the country. I also bought additional email addresses of libraries from a list broker. Finally, I composed a sales letter describing the book in detail, then hit the “send” button on my computer. The response was immediate and excellent. Many libraries ordered two or three copies; one ordered 15 for each of its branches. I even got orders from libraries located inside prisons and ones overseas.

The only storage I had at the homeless shelter was a small locker next to my bunk bed. It was already filled with my clothes and a second guitar. As the orders came in, I addressed large envelopes for each buyer. On the outside of each I marked the number of copies that had been purchased. Each day I called the copy shop with the total number of books I needed. By the time I got there, they were ready for me. I paid for the books upon picking them up—just $11 each—put them in the envelopes, then carried them to the post office a block away. I used a collapsible hand cart that I had purchased at Staples for $19 to do the carrying. Sales continued briskly and within a few months, I had enough money for two years worth of rent.

I found a studio apartment in a fashionable building in downtown DC. It was close to everything, including public transportation, and on a safe and vibrant street. My many friends, including some who volunteered for the Foundation, would not have difficulty coming there. I kept the furnishings sparse because I didn’t want a crowded feeling. My years in prison and at the homeless shelter discouraged me from seeking clutter. I moved in on April 1, 2004. The first thing I did was take a bath, my first in more than 11 years. Neither prison nor the shelter had bathtubs, though I used showers daily.

The next thing I did was arrange to entertain a woman there. So anxious was I that I didn’t wait for my furniture, which included a convertible sofa bed. I simply used a crate for candles and wine and propped my guitar against a wall. I laid a sheet on the floor to prevent rug burns. No stereo; I provided the music live. Other entertainment came from my sob story of false imprisonment and felonious treatment by my family. Not that I overdid it. I just stayed with the bare facts while keeping a smile on my face. The last thing I wanted was to be viewed as a victim. Call me an adventurer and a survivor, but also call me for a date.
Unfortunately one of my callers was a man who carried a gun. That’s speculation on my part about Sean Suber. My assumption is that all probation officers carry guns.

Of course I had to tell him my new location. I waited awhile to do it, however. No sense rushing it since I had not officially moved out of the homeless place immediately. While I gave up my bed there, I still received mail at that location. If he came looking for me, the staff would cover. They still valued me since I pledged to return to give music performances, a promise I kept.

I wasn’t a headache to Suber. My son and sister were, however, as they tried to tell him how to do his job. They encouraged him to do anything he could to “violate” me. I’m sure they argued that if I were back in prison the streets would be safe to walk for them as well as for other thieves and plunderers.

One way he could send me back to prison, I knew, was if he felt I had large amounts of money and was unwilling to part with no more than $5 monthly to pay my half-million dollar fine. I didn’t look forward to the inevitable showdown, but I felt I could win it.

When I finally invited him to my new apartment and declared I was no longer homeless, he seemed genuinely happy for me. By then we were friends, to the extent that a cop and a criminal can be. He had even seen my penis on two occasions, at his request. It happened during the course of a urine test, which a probation officer has to closely oversee so that “clean urine” is not substituted for a drug-infested sample. I didn’t balk at the inspection since I’m a very open-minded guy. Never did I fail the test. Plus I made all appointments and always spoke the truth to him, even about the hateful and duplicity of my son and sister, which he confirmed for himself. He even accepted gifts from me in the form of my two CD’s and various demo pressings I made. I gave them to him for his “file” on me, and he promised to listen to them. “It’s part of my job,” he said without winking.

His only problem with me was my refusal to work in a conventional job. But since I always had appointments and tests done at one hospital or another for my numerous and varied health complaints, he seemed content. My favorite hospital became Sibley Memorial in northwest DC because it has a baby grand piano in the lobby. Each trip there I greeted it like an old friend, sitting down to play for at least a half hour. If laughter is the best medicine, then music must surely be a miracle cure. When I played at Sibley I felt confident that my tests there would not have alarming results.

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“Looks like you’re living large here,” said Suber as he took his first walk through of my apartment. It wasn’t a long walk, the place being an average size studio. But compared to my homeless quarters, it was a mansion. He spoke with a smile on his face. A cop’s smile. How could I afford my own place, he asked, since I was jobless, and when could I pay more to take a greater bite out of my fine? I smiled back. “It’s not my place.” I showed him the lease. Sure enough, my name didn’t appear anywhere on it. It was in Helen’s name, president of the Foundation. That was done for two reasons, one political and one personal. Politically, I wanted to create an image of myself as being free from materialism, to demonstrate that I was fully committed to the cause of justice. In fact that was the case. The apartment became the headquarters for the Foundation, which Suber knew about and admired. The personal reason for not putting the lease in my own name, which my pride prevented me from telling Suber, was that I couldn’t, though this personable and intelligent professional would have understood. If I had applied for the apartment in my name, I would have been refused. On the application, I would have had to put for my “previous landlord” the director of the homeless shelter and for my landlord before that, the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Those weren’t acceptable. It would be even worse had they run my name through the Internet. The way charges were fabricated and piled on me in Florida, I could have been Jack the Ripper.

My arrangement with Helen and the Foundation, I told Suber, was that I’d get room and board at the apartment in exchange for putting in a few hours each week there for the nonprofit. Depending of course on my health. He could call Helen in New York to confirm the arrangement. Suber had spoken to her before and knew she’d confirm. A fan and a friend, she’d confirm that I’d relocated to Mars if necessary. Suber was covered, so he was happy. In fact I wouldn’t take any money from the Foundation. The rent for the apartment would be paid with Foundation checks. Its bank account was where the money from all the book sales was going, so there was plenty there.

The money I made from playing music was a different matter. Fortunately, Suber never read the entertainment section of the Washington Post where my name was frequently listed playing at the Old Post Office Pavilion stage. Except for the Kennedy Center, I’ve never played in a more beautiful venue. Built as a semi-circle, the stage is richly inlaid with wood. The large platform is bare except for a grand piano. A single chair and microphone is all I needed. I
simply brought my guitar, plugged in and played. My earnings went for clothing, CDs, music equipment and restaurants. And a regular “massage.” Man cannot live by bread alone, or by strictly spontaneous and sporadic sex. Checks for other gigs I played, mostly conventions and receptions, were made payable to the Foundation. I didn’t need them myself since all my needs were being met.

About the time I changed my residential address, I also changed women, the steady non-commercial squeezes in my life. It was time to move on because I had been dumped. My past had caught up with me and my girlfriend couldn’t accept it. Too many sins for her, both real and imagined. The way they caught up is that we had a lover’s disagreement and she went to her friends for consoling. They overdid it, providing a full Internet research report on me. In my life I’ve been called everything from a pugnacious felon to a “pig fucker.” The latter is what Lyndon Johnson called his enemies. People don’t seem to realize that the Internet is like a men’s room wall. Anything can be put there by anyone. Easier than using a magic marker, all you need is a computer. With friends like she had, I didn’t need enemies.

The attack against me was a watershed event that I neither had the energy nor the desire to fight. The breakup came at a good time since I didn’t need to go to her place anymore when I wanted to get away from the shelter and/or Suber. I had my own hideaway now.

Speaking of Suber, he generally behaved himself and respected my boundaries. But not always. Maybe he wasn’t getting enough love and affection at home. During one period he made a pest of himself by coming to my place unannounced on a regular basis. Somehow he got into the building—I never asked him how—and appeared in my hallway rapping on my apartment door. Rarely did I let him in. There was no need to since he didn’t know I was home. If he needed to speak to me, let him slip a note under the door and I would call him. Eventually. But he didn’t do that and soon left with a bruised ego and perhaps similarly impaired knuckles from knocking. Maybe he feared that someone would call the police and report him as a trespasser. Despite my friendly feelings for the man, I would have served as a witness for anyone who pressed charges.

One day he arrived and I surprised him by flinging open the door after only a few knocks. I also stunned him in that I was completely naked. He had come at an inopportune time when I was “entertaining.” Why had I opened the door at all? The short answer is that I couldn’t resist. The entertaining I did had just reached the point where it was time for a cigarette. Since I don’t smoke, my mischievous act seemed an appropriate substitute. I made the point with my action that this was my apartment and if he came
unannounced he did so at his own risk. Sometimes in making a point, a picture is worth a thousand words. He emitted a startled sound and jerked his head to the side when he saw me. His reaction could not have been stronger had I pointed a gun at him. In a sense, that’s what I did.

“I’m sorry,” I said insincerely. “I’m not alone and I didn’t have time to put something on. I didn’t want to keep you waiting.” I invited him in and asked him to sit down, pointing to a chair. Suber sat while I found a pair of underwear lying nearby and slipped them on. Then I sat down on another chair.

“I stopped by to see how you are doing,” he said as he looked around the room and saw my clothes and a woman’s strewn about. I smiled and called out her name. The bathroom door opened and she exited with a towel wrapped around her. Introductions were made and light chatter was engaged in as if this were a tea social, albeit one in a geisha house. Considerate as usual, in his military way, Suber left shortly thereafter. Another time I was alone when I heard the door knocking. I wasn’t in a mood to see Suber so I ignored it. When I heard him hitting the door louder than usual, I was more determined than ever not to let him in. Let him knock on someone else’s door and leave me alone. The knocking persisted so I went into my bathroom, the only other space in the apartment with a door I could close. As I sat on the toilet fully clothed, the knocking stopped. But to my horror, I heard the door open. How did he get in? Any respect or feelings of trust I had for the man vanished at that point. I felt like dialing 911 from the bathroom to report an intruder. But I hesitated when I thought that he would then know that I had a cell phone; and I would have to change the number again. Better to report the incident to his supervisor and maybe the ACLU. Surely one or the other would take action. I didn’t want to see him get too badly beaten up, however. Still, he had stepped over the line. If I wasn’t such a reasonable person, and if I had known he would do this, perhaps I would have set a booby trap. I thought through how. Perhaps with water balloons.

After I heard the door open, there was silence. I pictured him standing by the open door, stretching his neck inside to survey the place. Surely he wouldn’t step inside. Staying put where he was, he could claim on a witness stand if I brought charges against him that he didn’t open the door at all. It was already slightly ajar and that his polite knocking caused it to open. Then he stepped inside only enough to make sure I wasn’t sprawled out on the floor dead. That would be upsetting to him, he’d say, because he loved all the ex-cons he supervised. Even the ones who proved to be worthless and had to
be sent back to prison by him. But Dennis was different, which is why he especially cherished me and cared about my safety. He, Suber, would even, your Honor, give Sobin mouth-to-mouth resuscitation without the standard use of first putting a protective plastic bag over the injured probationer’s head.

The lying bastard. The sooner he left my apartment the better. And take his cop smell with him.

But he didn’t leave, though I heard the door close and assumed that he was gone. Only a few seconds passed before I heard a knock on the bathroom door. The son of a pig poker knew exactly where I was hiding! The doorknob turned as I silently cursed myself for not locking the bathroom door. But what good would that have done? It would only have confirmed that I was home and hiding like a coward. Not just a coward but a creep. Who else would sit on his toilet fully clothed?

A startled face and a spontaneous “I’m sorry” suddenly filled the bathroom. I remained awkwardly seated as I looked up to see someone other than Suber looking at me. The man had a uniform, but not an intimidating one. His shirt featured his name embroidered over the pocket; his first name. I recognized him as the building maintenance worker. He said he was there because I had left a note at the front desk the previous day about a dripping bathroom sink. Could he take a look at it or was I busy? The man had a sense of humor, not much different than my own.

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The Foundation got its money’s worth from that apartment. It’s where volunteers came to write to prisoners. Our letters encouraged them to keep their hopes alive and their sanity intact by engaging in creative pursuits. Before I had the apartment we would meet at a local library to do the work. But the mail from inmate writers, composers, artists and musicians was starting to arrive in volume. To keep up with it, a permanent location was necessary.

When my first two CDs, Prison Tracks and Christmas in Prison, came out, the Foundation received much publicity in prison publications. That resulted in a great deal of inmate mail. When we responded, we included information on contacts and resources that were available to inmates pursuing the arts. That way they could let time work for them rather than simply “do time.” We also included order forms if they wanted to purchase one or both of the CDs. My goal wasn’t to make money from prisoners since they generally have so little. We priced the CDs very low for them: just $2 each, with free
shipping. This barely covered the cost but we had another goal. With few prisons allowing inmates to get CDs, we knew they would order them as gifts for loved ones. We even offered to include a card telling the recipient that it was sent by the prisoner. All of this for $2. And the prisoner could pay with unused postage stamps. Why not since we were always in need of stamps?

This allowed us to compile a list of outside supporters. We used the mailing list from time to time to solicit donations. When we began to publish a newsletter, *Art for Justice*, they all got complimentary copies. Donations were frequently made in the amount of $10 or more, sometimes as much as $100, and in one instance $500. All from loved ones of prisoners who appreciated what we were doing.

I held myself out as an example of how creative endeavors in prison can help pave the way for reentry to the free world. It wasn’t just about making money or receiving publicity. Publishing my books, releasing CDs and performing in public gave me inner peace and self-assurance that were vital to overcome the discrimination and second-class citizen status that all prisoners face. The obstacles were particularly acute in my case because I not only had skeptical strangers to contend with, but a son and sibling bent on my destruction. I felt sorry for Suber to have to deal with them. They could be very strong-willed and had a lot of influence. My sister had a lot of connections through various nonprofit organizations. My son, despite many obstacles, had become a lawyer. That didn’t seem possible after he dropped out of college to work with his mother, first in her marijuana enterprise and then in her escort service. Both of them were arrested. I bailed him out but couldn’t do much for his mother, who was also indicted for income tax evasion. She went to prison while my son went back to college and then to law school with my assistance. Among other things I provided him was a rent-free apartment for him and his girlfriend as well as substantial start-up funds for a *legal* income-producing enterprise. He passed the bar on the first try and fought successfully to be licensed as a lawyer despite his two felony convictions.

After that he applied for and received a presidential pardon. That and his court victory gave him a lot of standing. But not enough to achieve his dream of joining the FBI to become one of its special agents: a lawyer with a gun. The bureau, after an interview, background check and personality profile, rejected him. But he didn’t blame his mother or himself. He blamed me. I gave his mother a job that enabled her to get out of prison on parole. She thanked me by turning her back on me when I went to prison, and then encouraged
my son and sister to do the same. They didn’t need much encouragement after my mother died and a fortune beckoned them. The timing for thieves could not have been better.

While they could take money from me, they could not steal the creative skills I had developed in prison. On the outside, my work and abilities were becoming increasingly recognized. As a result, the power equation between my family and me was starting to equalize. Suber came to realize that my son and sister were not the only ones with clout. I was developing a strong base and large following. Not that he would have taken sides based on this power play alone. He was, after all, a man of conscience and genuinely trying to do right by me. Yet the stronger I got, the less his burden became in fending off unreasonable demands by my family to have me re-incarcerated. He could point to me as a force that also had to be reckoned with.

Until Thanksgiving 2004, the bulk of publicity I had received was in minor publications. Then I hit the big time. The Washington Post wanted to do an article about me and a TV station wanted me as an interview subject for a special program dealing with the arts. These two media happenings occurred in the same week. What a great holiday gift!

On television, I glossed over the difficulties my son and sister had presented me. In fact I dedicated a song to my entire family. Despite the fact that both my son and sister had stay-away orders against me at that point, I knew I would violate nothing by making this gesture. Christmas was around the corner and perhaps their hearts would soften and their purse strings loosen. The latter wasn’t important anymore. I was no longer homeless and my career was moving rapidly forward.

Coincidentally, a few days before the media blitz, I was in court to meet with my son’s and sister’s lawyer. It was a hearing that I had initiated as the first step in my lawsuit against them to recover the stolen funds. After the hearing I spoke to their attorney in the court hallway. She wasn’t interested in settling the case she said since she had no authority to do so. She also didn’t think I had much chance of winning. In fact my son had not yet been formally served with legal papers, doing everything he could to evade getting them. I mentioned to her that I would be interviewed by the Washington Post that weekend and the matter of my relationship with my family would be discussed. Did my son wish to be present? In the interest of fairness, he could then present his own point of view, I said. It didn’t make sense to invite my sister since she lived in Hawaii. If it were possible for her to come I would have invited her too. It was the holiday season and I was feeling generous. My son’s Christmas gift to
me the previous year had been to cancel our planned mediation session and thereby dash my hopes for an informal resolution of the money issue standing between us. Perhaps this year he would present me with something more positive. With the invitation I extended through his attorney, I left the door open for it to happen.

But it didn’t occur. In fact, just the opposite happened. He intensified his war against me. Somehow he convinced the head of the domestic violence branch of the DC Attorney General’s office that he feared me, that my Washington Post interview invitation was a trick to draw him out so I could hurt him. There was no evidence of this whatsoever but that didn’t stop a government lawyer he knew from bringing charges against me. The offense she alleged was that I committed a violation of the court order by attempting to make contact with my son through his attorney by extending the invitation to the Post interview. Never mind that the judge who issued the order in the first place said that if I needed to contact my son, I had to do it through his attorney. And that’s what I did.

Of course, if you are a lawyer you don’t accept judicial decisions on their face value. You try to find a way around them. Anything that deals with the legal process is open to interpretation. And if you’re the head of a powerful branch of the Attorney General’s office, this is doubly true. What I didn’t know about the government attorney who took up my son’s campaign against me was that he had recently gotten a job in her agency. They were colleagues. It showed when they faced me together in court, acting like a pair of vultures protecting each other in a threatening situation. Shoot first and ask questions later. The government attorney, at the top of her game, knew the contest well. She would do this favor for her colleague, pulling out all the stops to hand him my head. Her first decision was to bring this trivial matter to court in the first place. I’m certain she wouldn’t have done it had Judge Liebowitz still been overseeing the case. But the new judge, the one who had issued the stay away order on the flimsiest of grounds, was a different animal.

The Washington Post interview went well. Its article about me and my creative endeavors in and out of prison was very accurate. It was the first of three terrific complimentary articles that the Post would write about me over the next two years. I didn’t know that such success was in store for me when that first story appeared. What I had on my mind was the prospect of going back to prison. If my son could get me convicted of the charge his colleague brought against me, it could easily happen. Even if Suber was more on my side than my family’s, he would have difficulty stopping it.
It was early in the spring of 2005 when I faced the judge who had previously shown his allegiance to my son by issuing the stay away order against me. Knowing this, my attorney tried to demand a jury trial. But the judge denied it. He would try the case himself, something he had the option of doing in the charge against me for violating the restraining order. Recalling his animosity and harsh words to me when he had issued the stay away order, I believed that the outcome of the trial was predetermined. Sitting through it, I felt like Alice walking in the upside down world of Wonderland. My lawyer was good, but when you’re dealing with a judge whose mind is made up, not much can be done. In the end, the magistrate announced my conviction and said it boiled down to this: yes, I could contact my son through his attorney, but I couldn’t relay a message that way. It had to be something connected to the court proceedings. Surely I must have known that the Washington Post coverage, as good as it was, didn’t fall into that category. I was entitled to tell my son about the interview and how it might concern him through his attorney, but only if my own attorney carried the message to his attorney. The Mad Hatter had spoken. At sentencing, the judge reminded me of another Alice in Wonderland character, the Queen of Hearts with her “off with their heads” proclamation. The judge proved himself to be no more merciful.

I’m sure he wanted to sentence me on the spot. But there were too many observers in the courtroom to witness what he intended to do. Better to let me go for a few months and then pull me back so he could put the noose around my neck and spring the trap door with fewer observers. He ordered me to return for my sentencing. That gave me a little breathing room but not much. During that time a few things happened. First, I was interviewed and investigated by a court official who would recommend to the judge what my punishment should be. I welcomed that since this person would be independent of the judge. Surely she would see the trivial nature of the violation, if they even saw a violation in my polite behavior in speaking to my son’s attorney.

She proved to be a reasonable woman who had apparently never spent time in Wonderland and didn’t see the logic of my conviction. This conscience-driven professional reminded me of someone I met in the courtroom the previous year when my son had railed against me before the new judge to get his order. That person later approached me in the hallway during recess. “It’s a shame what your son is doing to you. He should respect the commandment in the Bible to honor and respect thy father. I’m sorry.” I nodded gravely, resisting the temptation to say, “The Bible isn’t read in law school.”
The court investigator said much the same thing as this stranger. Her report to the judge painted a positive picture of me. In it, she recommended no punishment, only a short period of probation.

As that report sat on the judge’s desk collecting dust, I had another more worrisome matter to contend with. Suber let me know that a hearing had been scheduled before another judge to consider ending my “supervised release” and sending me back to prison. If that happened, it would be for a longer period than the maximum punishment I could receive for the misdemeanor I’d just been convicted of. Usually it takes a lot less than a new conviction to go back to prison: missed appointments with a probation officer, failure to find a job, dirty urine, and other glitches. Here I was convicted of a new crime and awaiting sentencing for it. Would I now have to pay the piper, or would my own music and creative efforts save the day?

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The judge in federal court for my supervised release revocation hearing slammed his gavel. I looked around to see what I was up against. I sat with my attorney at the defense table near the bench. Opposite us was Suber sitting next to a federal prosecutor.

It ended quickly when the judge announced he could not hear the case. He was removing himself from the matter because he didn’t feel he could be objective. He said that he had followed my activist work in the 1980s and had interacted with me on at least one occasion. He didn’t explain the circumstances or his feelings toward me. Most people liked my platform of keeping the government out of their private lives and using taxes for better services, even if they didn’t vote for me, thinking I couldn’t win. Of course there were exceptions, including a hateful moralist who threw a fiery Molotov cocktail through my home window on two occasions during that time. This judge didn’t seem the type.

He directed us to a courtroom where a magistrate was waiting to hear my case. We went there and the show began. What could I say? I had been convicted of a crime; the new judge wasn’t about to retry that case. Judges don’t normally step on each other’s toes; the further they stay away from another magistrate’s decisions, the better. The federal jurist didn’t want to hear about the case with my son.

But he did anyway. The main witness in a hearing of this type is the probation officer. Suber got up to speak, and he did do forcefully. He told the judge about my stay away order violation conviction, and how minor he considered it to be. Yes, it was a crime in a technical sense but I hadn’t hurt anyone. Except maybe my
dishonest and vengeful son’s feelings. He didn’t actually describe my son this way, but he implied it. Suber ended his complimentary speech about me by saying that he’d known me for more than two years and I had less than a year to go before completing my supervised release. He said I was a good guy who had nothing to hide. Perhaps he was thinking of the nude encounter. He urged the court to let me go, so I could finish my supervised release in peace, even in a jail cell if that’s what the Mad Hatter DC judge should dictate.

The federal judge seemed surprised at Suber’s support of me, perhaps thinking that we weren’t even of the same race. The judge would have even more surprised had he known about the runaround I had given Suber for the past 27 months, which I intended to continue for the next 9 months, if given a chance. When I had given him my Prison Tracks CD he saw that a number of songs on it had been written by Ray Charles, Smokey Robinson, R. Kelly and other African-American composers. He asked if my recording partner, Steve Andrew, was black. “I don’t know,” I said blankly, “I never asked him.” On another occasion he asked me if a woman he had seen me with was my girlfriend. I answered “None of your business! Your question is way out of line.” He knew enough to back off.

Besides common sense, Suber had empathy which showed in his remarks to the federal judge about my good points, never mentioning the bad. Suber made his comments while the judge scribbled notes. Or perhaps he was doodling. Drawing a picture of me with a halo on top of the horns that my recent conviction had given me. He was probably confused after Suber spoke, so he called upon the federal prosecutor to clarify matters. I braced myself for the worst. I knew a prosecutor had an adversarial role to play. That’s the nature of court proceedings. A prosecutor tells the most horrible things he can think of about a person, while the other side tells the best. It’s up to the judge to decide.

Here was the second shocker of the day. The prosecutor liked me too. Was he a reader of the Washington Post? A fan of my writing or music? An ACLU lawyer in disguise? I didn’t know or care. All I heard from him was his glorious opinion that I should be left alone. “Your Honor, his DC conviction relates purely to a minor family matter. We don’t think it rises to the level of a violation of Mr. Sobin’s supervised release.”

What could the judge do? With a look of surprise he sent me on my way. It was the same look one might give Houdini upon the magician escaping from a seemingly impossible situation.
I scurried out of the courtroom before he could change his mind. In the hallway, for the first time in an hour, I exhaled. I saw Suber nearby and I approached him to give my hearty thanks. He looked glum, as if on his way to an execution. His own. With a weak handshake, he accepted my words of appreciation. But his foreboding mood didn’t change. Finally he said, “I’m going to somehow have to find a way to explain this to your son and sister. They’re waiting to hear from me.”

Many joyous songs were played by me on guitar that night. I even started to write a new one. Too bad there weren’t any good words that rhyme with Suber. Sugar just didn’t cut it.

Soon I was in front of the other judge, the bad one, the one who had sided with my son and decided to convict me for the flimsiest of reasons. He seemed surprised to see me in normal clothes rather than a prison uniform, disappointed that the other judge had not revoked my supervised release. That wasn’t the end of his disappointment. He read the court investigator’s report about me and her recommendation that I shouldn’t be sent to jail. Then another surprise: the prosecutor, my son’s co-worker in the Attorney General’s office and a rabid critic of me throughout the trial, recommended just 30 days in jail. That surprised all of us. We expected her to push for lethal injection, or at the very least chemical castration. Never mind that these punishments exceeded the maximum penalty for my offense. The judge hadn’t been constrained by law or logic up to now.

Before sentencing, the judge asked if I had anything to say for myself. What could I say? That since my son couldn’t get rid of the lawsuit I had against him, he was trying to get rid of me by pressing this absurd charge? That he got lucky by finding a judge like you, your Honor, who foamed at the mouth and had a scavenger’s need for flesh? I decided that the less I said the better. I gave an apology and thanked the more than 30 justice and arts leaders who wrote the judge on my behalf asking for leniency. They called me a dedicated individual who generously shared his talent and creativity with the community. It would be a shame to lose him, even for a short while, they said. This may have penetrated the judge’s brain, but not his heart. I could see that in his stony, unmoved face. It had death written. Mine.

I then went into my backup plan. He asked me if I were through with my brief remarks. I said I was but wanted to do something to demonstrate to him what Washington would be missing in my absence. I asked him if I could play a short song on my classical guitar. In making the request I knew that the judge was a
musician himself. He performed with other tuneful magistrates and a psychologist—their manager—in a group called “Deaf Dog and the Indictments.” Little did I realize that he was the deaf dog in the group. What else could account for his non-reaction to the song he gave me permission to instrumentally perform? I chose The Star Spangled Banner. It worked for Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock, perhaps it would help me here.

When I finished he promptly sentenced me to the maximum punishment allowed by law. It was what my son recommended in his “victim impact statement.” The judge gave me a six-month sentence and two years of probation. Because he had to hang something over my head to give the probation teeth, he ordered me to go to jail for three months immediately and then go to jail for the remaining three months if I failed to meet all the requirements of probation. And he alone would decide that. I should have told him to go screw himself at that point since I knew he and my legal-beagle son would find a reason to have me do the second three months. Instead, I collapsed at the shock of what they had done to me. The courtroom turned into a Twilight Zone, and everything was spinning. Medics were called, an ambulance was summoned and the jail medical wing was notified to expect a new resident.

Having this seizure, which turned out to be a mere fainting spell, proved to have a few advantages. For one, the fear I had of being sent to the dingy dungeon with verbally abusive guards in the basement of the courthouse didn’t happen. That’s the normal procedure for freshly sentenced defendants. They are shackled and left to wait in the basement bullpen for the jail bus to arrive. After boarding the bus with their hands and legs still in chains, the vehicle emerges from the rear of the courthouse like a turd. But not for me. Not today. I would now be leaving the building in dignity. The same way I arrived. Through the front door, albeit on a stretcher. I would then be placed in a waiting ambulance.

The second advantage was that I wouldn’t be taken to jail, at least not yet. I would spend a leisurely three days recuperating in a very good hospital, Southeast Memorial. All while my 90 days of jail time were running. Too bad I couldn’t serve the entire sentence there. I stayed in a special section of the hospital, a “secured” wing. That meant the convicted patients there couldn’t leave without getting shot, which would have led to a trip to the downstairs emergency room if not the basement morgue. Aside from that mildly depressing feature, the wing looked and operated like a first-class hospital in every respect. The food was good and the view from this upper level section excellent. I even had visitors.
I also benefited by being misdiagnosed at the hospital, as having suffered a mild stroke. That meant I wouldn’t go to the jail at all but rather to the new annex called the Correctional Treatment Facility. There a medical ward would be my home for the next two months and 27 days. It wasn’t Southeast Hospital, but it was better than jail.

I wrote and composed music there just as I had done in prison in the 1990s. But I added something else to my work schedule. I wrote grant proposals for my Foundation to see if we could get funding. There were grant programs conducted by government agencies with deadlines looming. I would have passed them by on the outside, thinking that the relatively new Foundation would not have much of a chance for funding. Suddenly, I had the time to think up grant ideas and write them up in detail. That’s how I got our first major grant for the Foundation.
Chapter 6
Getting a Foothold and an Audience

I got out of jail in mid-summer 2005, a few months before my 62nd birthday. It is a date I will always remember because I got a congratulations letter from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities telling me that the grant application I wrote in jail had been accepted. I also had a very unpleasant experience. I met my new probation officer who seemed to be a clone of my son. He treated me as if I were Osama Bin Laden on crack.

There were frequent drug tests and even more interrogations. He resembled a drop-out from police academy who couldn’t get over the fact that he wasn’t on the force. So he played cop anyway. Robocop. What happened to Suber? He was still on the scene but in the background, not unlike before. In fact I now had two probation officers. Suber for my original case that brought me to prison and the new man for the DC conviction that my son had brought against me.

The advantage of having two was that they could keep each other entertained at their own expense rather than mine. It happened when they converged on my residence at the same time. I’m sure it wasn’t planned that way since they seemed as surprised as I was. When one of them left my home, the other was arriving. I can’t recall who was coming or going. I remember, however, that I left both of them in the dust to talk about me among themselves. I suggested that they share notes since I had an “urgent” health matter to attend to. Certainly seeing one’s full-body massage therapist under the circumstances to relieve stress qualified as urgent. That’s my preferred method of getting rid of tension when a wife or girlfriend is otherwise occupied.

The new probation guy wasn’t just rude and obnoxious, he was stupid. He always asked me if I had seen my son lately. I always gave him the same answer: not since I saw him in court, when he summoned me to be there. Before that I only spoke to his attorney. I didn’t care about seeing my son, not then and not now. It’s his choice. I only care about seeing the money he and my sister stole from me.

Over the next eight months Robocop would do everything he could to ingratiate himself was my son. I still wasn’t aware that the latter had gotten a job as an attorney in the DC Attorney General’s office. The position gave him a lot of clout. I was up against a battleship that I had mistaken for a yacht. It would be some time before I realized why the guns pointed at me were so big and loud.
When the Foundation’s new grant began, I had many things to consume my time. There was money in the grant to buy a small digital recording system. My home was now more than an office for the Foundation, it was a recording studio. With two CDs under my belt, I was ready to record more. Since the last recording produced by Lisa Missenda, I had changed churches. My new one, First Trinity Lutheran Church, was just a block from my apartment. It had an even better music program than the previous church and I became an integral part of it. Not only did I play with outstanding musicians that they hired for the services, but I did a 10-minute solo as a “prelude” before the services began. I also performed at church receptions and special events. All this without monetary compensation. I didn’t want any. I wanted the church to support the Foundation. It did so in a big way thanks to two outstanding pastors who understood my goals and commitment. Pastors Tom Knoll and Wendy Moen opened both their hearts and the doors of their beautiful church to me. Again, I was given the key and 24-hour access. In addition, secure storage space was provided for the Foundation. This was important because the Foundation had launched a program to accept art created by inmates, then sell it for them at prison arts and crafts shows we sponsored. The church also allowed me to use its social hall and sanctuary for our events, including art shows and musical performances. The music was performed by ex-prisoners such as me, and often featured songs written by incarcerated composers. Our publicity, attendance and revenue reached new heights.

I never passed up an opportunity to speak or perform for the media. Why should I when the purpose of marketing one’s creative output is to get word out about it? One day I got a call from Jose Dominquez. He was a grants officer for the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and was instrumental in getting funding for the Foundation. His position may sound colorless, but Jose was anything but that. He got me a lot of good gigs, so good that I sometimes did them for free. For example, I was once asked to play for a VIP Christmas party for the board of his grant-making agency. Why ask for a fee of a few hundred dollars when I could get grants for tens of thousands of dollars with the contacts I made there?

Jose had a special flair for media opportunities. He himself looked and spoke like an actor, an occupation he once held. In front of a microphone or camera, he was a natural. He called me one day to ask if I wanted to appear on a radio show with him to share my music and writing. I accepted without knowing where or when it would be. When I asked for details, he told me. I put it on my calendar without hesitation. There would be no conflict. The only thing I would lose in
doing the show was sleep. The radio appearance at a minor station would take place from 2 am to 4 am on a weekday morning. Despite feeling like zombies when we arrived there, we acted and were treated like stars. We had a great time.

My first foray into producing CDs after I acquired recording equipment was to do a CD for First Trinity Lutheran Church. I knew that it would be a learning experience for me as well as a chance to do a favor for people who had been highly supportive. Pastor Tom had even come to my sentencing and was shocked at what the judge had done to me. The punishment I had gotten did not, of course, rise to the level of crucifixion, but was unjustified and sadistic nonetheless.

After I finished the recording project for the church, I had a good handle on how to record and create CDs. Henceforth I would be my own producer until such time that a big record company would come along, if ever, to take over the job. If I could self-publish my own books, why couldn’t I do the same with CDs? I had come a long way from prison and the homeless shelter where my options were limited. Now occupying an apartment that served as office, home, publishing headquarters and recording studio, I felt that I had unlimited potential. Even money was no obstacle thanks to the successful grant proposal I had written in a jail cell and other successful outreach.

I would soon have large audiences thanks to my colorful past and growing reputation as an artist with a creative bent and a strong sense of justice. Wherever I played, wherever I spoke, whatever I wrote, I never forgot the incarcerated artists and musicians I left behind. My three-month stay in the local jail only fortified my resolve and strengthened my image as a person who had seen injustice first hand. And had overcome it. I also came out of the three-month stretch with a greater body of creative work, not to mention a greater body. Whenever I spend time on the inside, I engage in a full exercise program. I also exercise my mind. During that 90-day stint, I read books about great American popular composers like Jerome Kern and Duke Ellington whose music I intended to record.

It wasn’t just the great American songbook that I intended to interpret and place on CDs, but other material, including my own. I wanted to reach out and touch different types of people with music. The first three CDs I produced during that period serve as examples of my attempt to seek and be sensitive to diversified listeners. Just because I spent years in prison, and most recently a few months in jail, didn’t mean I didn’t have a wholesome heart that directed me to try to please others.
My first CD production I called Beatles Forever. As the name implies, the CD consisted of songs by the Beatles that I interpreted with three guitars. Why three instruments? Because I wanted to continue the multi-guitar style that I had started with fellow inmate Steve Andrew at FCI Petersburg. Despite the success of Christmas in Prison, which was my first album after the prison-recorded Prison Tracks, I wanted to do more than guitar duets in my CDs. Because I now had my own equipment I could take my time. I had felt rushed with Christmas in Prison since I was on the clock. Recording with two guitars, one on top of the other, seemed the most I could do in the production time I had available. Owning the clock now by having my personal recording setup, I could go slower and turn myself into a trio instead of a duo. It would take more time but my prison and jail experience taught me that time is not necessarily a bad thing.

The way in which I recorded Beatles Forever would set a pattern for many other CDs I would produce. I used three recording tracks. On the first I played rhythm by strumming chords and finger picking arpeggios. The second track consisted of the melody. There was no guesswork or improvisation on my part. I played the songs exactly as the Beatles wrote them. My sight reading ability that I had developed in prison allowed me to do that. Note for note I played each song precisely. The third guitar was for fill-ins, bass lines and other embellishments. Here is where I improvised just as any lead guitarist would do. I borrowed from Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, George Harrison and others who excelled in this area. Of course, since Harrison was a member of the Beatles, I covered his signature licks throughout.

The songs I selected from the Beatles work of almost 300 tunes were the ones that lent themselves to guitar trio interpretations. I chose more than I could fit on a CD. Since this was art, not science, I couldn’t predict which songs would sound best. Better to record more than I needed and decide later which to keep for the CD. Steve Andrew had told me that this is how the biggest names in music do it. He knew first hand since. Before coming to prison, a few of his compositions had been picked up and recorded by major recording artists. But they didn’t get through the final selection process for released albums. Had they passed that threshold, Steve would have had important stature in the entertainment world. A judge would have probably sentenced him to community service rather than giving him a ton of prison time for his victimless drug offense.

Why the Beatles instead of other songwriters, including myself, for my first CD as the “Sobin Guitar Trio, featuring Dennis Sobin”? A few reasons. The Beatles are the most successful and
widely admired songwriters of the second half of the 20th century. Many people have referred to them as the “big bang in rock music.” They excelled in more than rock. Ballads, blues, country and just about anything else were their bailiwick. They had the diversified music I wanted. What better way to reach a wide audience? I studied the Beatles music intently during my final years in prison. Lee Amidault had the complete Beatles songbook in two volumes and he was generous in letting me borrow and copy the songs I wanted. I didn’t make my selections until I played every song. That’s how I was able to decide what worked best as guitar instrumentals. With this background of rehearsing and arranging the Beatles songs in prison, it was only natural that I would want them for my first self-produced CD outside.

Following the Beatles project, I recorded Mostly Motown. This consisted of songs written by black composers, most of them part of Berry Gordy’s production group in Detroit, Motor City, Motown. I didn’t include Gordy’s most prolific composer, William “Smokey” Robinson. My reason was that his output was so large I wanted to do a CD entirely of his work.

I was excited about recording the CD, Mostly Motown, for both political and personal reasons. From a political standpoint, I knew how popular Motown songs were in DC, a place sometimes called Chocolate City because its population of almost 600,000 is 75% black. Personally, I like Motown a lot. I even included a few Motown tunes on Prison Tracks after Steve Andrews told me he had once played in a Motown cover band. He did justice to the sound as he musically morphed himself from a country boy into an inner city dude. In prison I had read Berry Gordy’s autobiography, which impressed me greatly. A well-rounded man, he not only excelled in production details and business acumen but was a fine songwriter in his own right. Calling his operation “The Hit Factory,” he wrote some and produced all of its hits.

A third album, Latin Love, completed my trilogy of initial CD making. It consisted of songs originating from South America and other Hispanic enclaves, including the Latinos in Hollywood. I sought to include all the standards like “La Bamba,” “La Cucaracha,” “It’s Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom Time” and “Girl from Ipanema.” Also, I recorded California Latin schmaltz such as “In a Spanish Town” written by the romantic American, Mabel Wayne, in the 1920’s. I also included little-known folk tunes from Bolivia, Argentina and other points south. They had pretty melodies that gave me a chance to show off my sight reading skills. I discovered these gems while I was doing research for the album at the Library of
Congress’s Music Department and the music division of Washington, DC’s Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Library. That’s my standard procedure: collect songs, select ones for a planned CD, record more than I need, and chose the best for an hour-plus CD.

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With three diversified CDs recorded by my virtual trio, it was time to beat the bushes for a following and support. I took off my artist’s hat and put on my marketing one. Since it’s always best to start out with easy-to-do promotions, I went to my computer. I had already decided that anything recorded by the Sobin Trio would go on the foundation’s website for easy access and free downloads. That made sense, at least up to the moment that a major recording company took an interest in my work. I wasn’t holding my breath, nor was I lacking for money to deposit in the bank. When people went to the website to access the songs, they were prompted to make a donation so that more could be produced. Many of them did, some for amounts far exceeding the suggested price of the CD. Clearly they not only liked my music but were attracted to “my story.” I knew when I left prison it would be foolish to put my ordeal behind me. It had the potential to garner much attention, and that’s what marketing is all about.

Similarly, I had no intention of hiding my CDs in a locked closet waiting for mail orders or in-person sales. Such sales would come, but I wanted the enormous power of the Internet to help spread the word. I was proud of the CDs I produced. Why put them under a rock where they weren’t accessible? Better to give away the music and make fans rather than remain an unknown.

The strategy proved very productive. I got a lot of lucrative and artistically rewarding playing engagements from it. When I emailed someone in a position to retain me for a festival or convention, I put a link to the website. All that person had to do was click to hear the diversity and quality of the music I made. Of course they wouldn’t get the same music at their event. After all, I am one person and not a trio. I explained this, but I always emphasized that I make a full and similar sound on my own.

The events at which I played were far more rewarding than the Old Post Office Pavilion stage, as prestigious and well-paying as that venue was. At $100 per hour, my playing there meant that I could walk away with several hundred dollars per gig. I played there during George W. Bush’s second inauguration on January 20, 2005. Since the Pavilion is on Pennsylvania Avenue, the inauguration parade
passed directly by while traveling from the Capitol to the White House. People got cold watching the parade, so they streamed into the Pavilion. The most dominant feature when they entered was the large stage, with me on it. As usual, I wore my classical musician’s outfit which consisted of a solid, conservative sport coat and tie. But my repertoire was different on that day. Instead of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and jazz and Broadway standards, I played patriotic music. It fit the occasion perfectly just as I knew it would when I rehearsed and arranged these songs for solo guitar while in prison.

I had tried to plan for my re-entry into society with the thought of what songs would be best received in Washington. I wanted to include these songs in my repertoire. That’s when I had a friend send me a songbook of patriotic tunes. Perfect! I don’t think there is another guitarist around who plays as many as I do.

The judge who sent me to jail for three months may not have been moved by my rendition of the “Star Spangled Banner” but the crowd I played for that inauguration day loved it. They also liked the many other patriotic songs I did. Most musicians can’t name a dozen patriotic songs, much less play them. Of course they haven’t had the advantage of being in prison. I can do that many patriotic songs and more. After two hours of performing, which was my commitment for the day, the manager of the Pavilion invited me to stay as long as I wished. The crowd was not only listening to me, but they were buying lots of food and merchandise from the shops throughout the Pavilion. Inside the cavernous building, my music could be heard everywhere. I agreed to play two more hours, making $400 that afternoon and having a grand time. It was the highest amount I had made to that point, but it would pale in comparison to what my music would soon fetch.

Playing for justice-related conventions and for university student bodies became my most lucrative appearances. They not only had the budgets to pay me and my organization well, but they served as vehicles for finding loyal supporters. When I played at the national ACLU convention, I placed my CDs in front of the stage with a sign that said “Free with your business card. Please take one when you deposit your business card here.” At the end of my playing I gathered the business cards. The next day I emailed all of the people who had left their cards, thanking them for taking my CD and hoping that they found it enjoyable. I didn’t ask for a response but usually got one. It didn’t matter. They had been added to the Foundation’s email list to receive weekly news about our projects. That included suggested ways for them to help, either with their time or money. Within a few years, I would have more than 4,000 people on my email list. As a
result, the fundraising events and special activities of the Foundation, as well as my own performances, would be consistently well attended and monetarily supported.

My venues were getting larger, often in ballrooms of major hotels where justice conventions were held. I felt like a star arriving with my own entourage. The only equipment I brought was my guitar. Sound systems were provided for me along with someone to operate them. I always told the sound people how much I appreciated them. My appreciation was sincere; the best performers in the world will not sound good without an adequate and professionally operated amplification system. I always asked these professionals to name their favorite songs so I could include them in my performance. That way they’d surely pay attention. One person I encountered had an Irish sounding name. I began my playing with a rendition of “Danny Boy.”

Just because the venues were getting bigger didn’t mean I rejected smaller ones. If they promoted the work and the mission of the Foundation to help artists and writers in prison, I wouldn’t hesitate to do them. Whether they took place at the US Capitol or City Hall, my guitar was packed in an instant and ready to go. I played for events on both the Senate side and the House of Representatives side of the Capitol. The former had better food, including bigger shrimp, but the latter had a more evenly distributed sound system. That went along with the image of each body: the Senate being more elitist, the House a place for commoners. I played for a House event in honor of an influential victims group. In the Senate, my playing once supported an event sponsored by the International Community Corrections Association. This association consists of operators of halfway houses. Why shouldn’t I contribute my playing to their work? I firmly believe that more halfway houses and less prisons should be built. In a halfway house men and women can hold a job and help keep a family together.

Would I play in a prison or for a group of people who made their living in prisons? I have done both. In show business, as in politics, everyone is a potential supporter. Even the most unlikely constituent should not be ignored. I played at an Italian restaurant in Baltimore that was taken over for the evening by the North American Wardens Association. I was motivated to play well with the thought that if I didn’t I could be thrown in the hole. The only request I got during my performance was for a country song that I didn’t know. Instead I played the Hank Williams standard “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry.” The burly, clean-shaven warden liked it, but his wife didn’t seem pleased. Perhaps she sensed that I would someday write
about this stereotypical encounter. In fact, everyone was pleasant to me, even after they had emptied their numerous wine, beer and liquor bottles. I wasn’t even strip searched. But I think they were relieved when I opened my guitar case and saw an actual guitar there instead of a weapon. They paid me generously after my performance—in cash.

The smallest venue I played, and ultimately one of the most lucrative for the Foundation, was an elevator. Not even a large elevator, this one accommodated no more than four or five people. I was asked to do it by an agency director who gave grants to arts organizations. The agency was having a meeting of its board and wanted to give them something special when they arrived. I was that something special. Dressed in my formal attire, I sat with my guitar just outside the elevator. As commissioners arrived, individually or in pairs, I followed them into the elevator as if I were a high class mugger, my weapon being a guitar. Since time was short, I quickly explained my presence. “I’ve been asked to provide elevator music. I hope you enjoy it.” I didn’t ask for their song request since there was no time for conversation of any kind. There would be only about 30 seconds from the time the elevator left the ground floor until it arrived on the floor where the agency was located. I played short pieces such as Frederic Chopin’s famous “Prelude.” As Chopin wrote it, and as I played it, the entire song lasts 29 seconds.

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Playing and networking with people of influence did not always go hand in hand. Even at the Capitol or City Hall, if I were playing I could not go about and introduce myself when the bigwigs arrived. Most of it was my fault since I enjoy playing so much. Like composer George Gershwin who had a reputation for nonstop playing at the smallest affairs, if you put a guitar in my hand, I can go on forever. When I play a reception, I start before anyone arrives, playing music for the help. Then I play for the reception guests without taking a break, even if it lasts for hours. When it’s over, I don’t stop but continue to play for the help as they clean up.

I usually bring Foundation colleagues with me to these events. While I am playing, they are schmoozing. I enjoy watching them interact; such as Brian Parker, our special events coordinator. He knows his way around people and tells fascinating stories. He is also a great listener. I try not to play too loudly when he’s lining up support for the Foundation. Brian has even recruited family members to our cause. If only my family were half as supportive. Then again, I
admit to not as people oriented and outgoing as Brian. That isn’t to say I don’t like people, though admittedly I prefer the creative arts. If I come to an event to provide music, that’s what I believe I should be doing. Let my songs fill their hearts while my associates fill their ears.

At an ACLU reception I was complimented by one of the fine civil liberties attorneys in attendance, Arthur Spitzer. Art and I go back several decades. I credit him for keeping me out jail for many years, fighting ambitious politicians and antagonistic police who sought to stamp me out. They didn’t like my challenges to their often unconstitutional laws and actions. Had Art’s domain extended to the Bible Belt of Florida, I might have been spared imprisonment there. As I tuned my guitar in Art’s presence, I thought of Oscar Wilde’s trip to the American West in the late 19th century. Wilde noted a sign he saw in a frontier saloon above a musician. It read, “Don’t shoot me I’m only the piano player.” I paraphrased it when I said to Art prior to my performing, “Don’t arrest me, I’m only the guitar player.”

At some events, such as university forums, I spoke as well as played. When I wasn’t playing or speaking, I tried to meet people to spread the word about the Foundation’s work. I arrived with samples of my CDs and webcards so the people I met could access the Foundation’s website. Here’s where I often scored with important contacts.

I attended, for example, a speaking engagement of Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa. Knowing his voting record I thought he would be supportive of prisoners and ex-prisoners like me, who used the arts to advance themselves. I waited for him to finish his speech and then followed him into the hallway as his bodyguard eyed me suspiciously. Harkin was in a corner of the hallway speaking intently on his cell phone. I wasn’t the only one trying to get to him, and his assistant was keeping everyone away. I positioned myself near a door where the senator would likely exit. After waiting a few minutes, my opportunity came. As he passed me, I stuck out my hand to try to shake his. But the bodyguard, clearly experienced in such situations, blocked me. My chance was about to end, so I said in a loud voice, “Senator Harkin, I’m a writer-musician from prison trying to help the inmates I left behind.” He stopped immediately and took my hand. He explained to his anxious assistant as he looked at me, “This man is doing good work!”

With his high opinion of me, I figured I’d push further. After chatting briefly, I gave the Senator a copy of Prison Tracks. “Senator, can we get a photo together of me presenting this CD to you?” He
didn’t hesitate, took my camera and gave it to his bodyguard who began snapping away. Quite professionally, I might add.

Another time my quarry was U.S. Representative Bobby Scott of Virginia. Scott has done wonders in pushing for the rights of ex-prisoners to overcome obstacles that face us when we return to the free—but often non-welcoming—world. He spoke at a hearing in the Rayburn building, one of the office buildings of the US House of Representatives near the Capitol. When he finished, I was in the hallway waiting. “Representative Scott,” I began, then gave him an earful about the Foundation and my hope of enlisting his support. He acted like all good politicians, a trait they share with professional escorts whose company I enjoy: full of smiles, physical affection and unbridled compliments. Scott had distinguished himself the week before by being in the forefront of helping men and women crushed by the criminal justice system. I wanted to thank him with a gift: his choice of one of my three guitar trio CDs. He looked at each of them but had difficulty deciding. I could almost see his brain smoking. If he accepted Mostly Motown, he would appease his black constituents; Beatles Forever, his white ones; Latin Love, his Latino ones. He spoke about his fondness for each type of music as if I were Barbara Walters grilling him. Finally, Scott made a selection, but for the life of me I can’t recall which it was. Such is the power of a professional politician to divert and confuse. Still, the photo I took of him with all three CDs looked great in the Foundation’s newsletter.

Another supportive member of Congress, one who put his money—rather taxpayers’ money—where his mouth was: Representative Danny Davis. Hailing from Chicago, he is a much admired politician, and for good reason. While President Clinton used to say that he felt our pain, Davis analyzed it. He did so because he is a trained psychologist. But you’d never know it by speaking to him. He can talk on any level, his preference being to avoid the trappings of academia. That’s a good thing because no one wants a politician whose head is in the clouds and whose thoughts come from an ivory tower. The last major politician who gave us that dose of leadership was President Woodrow Wilson. A former college professor, he was the idealist who sought to stop Americans from drinking alcohol. He helped usher in the disastrous Prohibition, which brought violence and disrespect for law in America. It was a precursor of the equally problematic drug prohibition still in effect. Prohibition wasn’t the only thing Wilson shoved down the parched throats of his constituents. When the public finally resisted his utopian agenda, which included closing then legal brothels and outlawing much
consensual adult sex across America, he imploded, leaving office as a stroke victim and virtual vegetable.

If Representative Davis is a vegetable, he’s a hot pepper, capable of getting people’s attention. He got mine. Not only did he compliment me on my books and music, but he placed a hefty order for them through his congressional office. I personally filled the order and deposited the substantial check his staff sent me. That isn’t the end of the story, however. A month later I got a call from his office administrator. “Where’s our order?” she said. I told her that it had been sent, and that I had personally mailed it. But it didn’t arrive and it hadn’t been returned. I asked her to check around her office and let me know if it was there. If it wasn’t, we could put a tracer on it. I never heard back from her. Either she found it or concluded that the items had been stolen by the staff. I prefer to assume the latter. When people go to that extent to get their hands on your work, you know you are doing something right.

When I caught up with the mayor of D.C., he was making a speech at the Kennedy Center. The occasion was an arts awards program. I had come early because I wanted to catch him before he got on stage. It’s always best to try to nail a political leader sooner rather than later. That way if you miss your first chance you have a second opportunity. As the program got underway, he still hadn’t arrived. That was no surprise since he was scheduled to speak halfway through it. Why should he sit around for an entire program in which he only had a limited interest? I took a seat close to the back, keeping an eye out for his arrival. Suddenly, he was on the stage. How he got there was a mystery since I knew he couldn’t get past me using the standard entrance. I needed to find out how it happened so that I could apprehend him when he exited. Just as what goes up must come down, so who goes in must come out. But where?

I spotted an arts administrator friend, Lionell Thomas, who helped put the Kennedy Center program together. “How’d the mayor get in?” I asked him. “Through the stage door on the side,” he said. I knew the spot. Little about the place was unknown to me. I’d been in love with the Kennedy Center almost since the day it opened in the 1960’s. Then I was a young man, living and attending graduate school in New York. But I had occasion to visit Washington, D.C. from time to time for research I was doing. Stopping by the Kennedy Center was one of the trip’s pleasures. The proximity to this cultural institution entered into my decision to relocate to Washington during the bicentennial year of 1976. Eventually I moved to my present residence that’s just a few blocks from the Kennedy Center. Walking at a leisurely pace takes me there in only seven minutes.
Upon learning how the mayor came into the theater, I knew how he’d exit. I waited for him there. I’d once taken a tour of the Kennedy Center, so I knew where all the stage doors and hallways led. It’s not as easy to figure out as you might think. The center is a mammoth complex. It contains three major theaters that rival any playhouses that Paris, London or Broadway offer. They are all on the ground level. On upper levels there are more theaters that are smaller but no less well appointed. The mayor was speaking in one of the large ground floor ones.

Waiting for him, I was the only one in the hallway. The thousands inside were apparently not privy to the secrets I knew. He soon bounded out with a bodyguard in tow. I approached him and we had a pleasant conversation. Then I took a few photos of him holding my CD. I didn’t give him a choice of CDs since I didn’t want to put him on the spot as I had Representative Scott. Having met the mayor before, I liked him too much to place him in that position.

He was very generous with his time as I kept snapping away with my camera. I would have gotten one myself but I didn’t want to interrupt the flow. He was really hamming it up. Those photos would sell a lot of CDs for me, particularly in political circles.

One thing I’ve learned about successful politicians over the years, they are almost impossible to communicate with if you use conventional channels. That assumes you’re not a major contributor to their campaigns. If you are, getting through is no problem. A big enough contributor will even get a politician’s private cellphone number. If that isn’t instant access, I don’t know what is. The rest of us have to be more patient and innovative. Picking up the phone and trying to get through or going to their office to see them will get you nowhere.

I remember trying to contact Representative John Conyers. I didn’t want a favor from him but rather wanted to do him one. But since my favor didn’t involve a financial contribution, he had minimal interest. Instead of money I was offering him a chance to be included in my Christmas in Prison CD. All I wanted was the name of his favorite holiday song. I’d then include it along with his name. The album would include favorite songs of prisoners and “those who care about them.” Conyers, in my opinion, fell into the latter category because he had supported legislation and events to help ex-prisoners return to society. When I told my close friend and fellow Foundation board member Jim Pruitt about my feelings concerning Conyers, he nearly had a stroke. “That lowlife fucker,” Jim said, “is responsible for a whole lot of people going to prison. Don’t you know Conyers is one of the chief assholes whose pushing to continue drug prohibition
in America?" The war on drugs was a sensitive topic for Jim since he had once been a POW of it. He had spent several months in jail. It would have been much longer but his capture occurred during the early days of the drug war, before politicians competed with each other to impose harsher sentences. Decades later when a married couple that Jim had done business with were captured, both got life.

“Yes Jim, I know about Conyers.” What else could I say? To win in politics you have to be something of a chameleon. Speaking out of both sides of my mouth has never been my strong point, which may explain my series of political defeats. Still, I always speak politely to everyone. Conyers was now helping to rescue people from a house he had a hand in setting ablaze? At least, unlike other arsonists, he wasn’t turning his back on the misery he had caused.

I caught up with him at the Washington Convention Center where he presided over a forum on justice reform. It was kind of like finding Hitler praying in a synagogue. Like that notorious icon of the Nazi era, Conyers proved very personable and sensitive up close. He even gave me a souvenir to take with me after he warmly shook my hand, a gift he gave everyone. It was his business card that contained the classy gold embossed emblem of the US House of Representatives. Talk about impressing your friends. I still have that card years later. In addition to giving it to me, Conyers provided the information I sought. He told me his favorite Christmas song and even sang a few bars for me. Conyers got a CD and an earful about the Foundation for his trouble.

Marketing my work took as much effort and innovation as creating it. Perhaps that explains how I could go back and forth from one to the other so easily.

I never lost sight of my need to keep creating. I wrote and recorded every chance I got. My collection of Songs of Hope and Healing that I composed in prison was an early recording project. But I wasn’t prepared to release it just yet. I had written the songs primarily for my son and sister to hear. But they didn’t want me anywhere near them. Perhaps after they spent the money they had taken from me they would reach out. Would I forgive them? Of course I would. If not, my collection of forgiving songs would be an exercise in hypocrisy. Besides, why cry over spilt milk, or spent funds? I did my share of crying when I lived at the homeless shelter. Sometimes, I felt so bad there I had to crawl to the communal bathroom to use one of toilets in a long row. It was an emotional illness I was experiencing. The stress of not having a supportive network during those early post-prison days had resulted in dire symptoms.
But I survived and soon prospered. Before long, I had plenty of other people to rely upon, even if the mayor and Conyers weren’t two of them. Money too was plentiful. I didn’t care if the inheritance funds were gone. Better spent by my family than for the government to get its hands on them. Remember, I had exorbitant fines to pay; much of the money would have been taken from me. I’m not anti-government but I am against the further construction of prisons, which are mostly filled with harmless people. Like me. Better that my son and sister squander the money than to let the government use it for such counterproductive and harmful purposes.

While I enjoyed listening to my *Songs of Hope and Healing*, I was reluctant to share them with others. They were too personal. If people heard them, they might ask questions. Why? For whom? To answer would bring on stress. Best to discuss these matters with a therapist. Then leave your troubles behind at the shrink’s door.

I settled on less personal music to share with others. That presented no problem since I am a fan of the music of many composers. I can be creative with their music, particularly when I’m using three guitars and no voices or other instruments to interpret it. With my own recording equipment in my apartment, I could spend as much time recording as I wished. So I plunged ahead.

There are many fine composers in America. I began by choosing the best. George Gershwin, for example. He wrote songs as popular today as they were in his heyday of the 1920’s and 30’s. Time is not always kind to music, but it was to Gershwin. Part of the reason is that he was not reluctant to experiment. As a result, some of his tunes reflected his era while others went beyond it. For example, his innovative folk opera *Porgy and Bess* took decades to catch on. The *George Gershwin Songbook*, as I called my undertaking, was a good project for the Sobin Guitar Trio.

Another composer I greatly admired whose songs I recorded was Irving Berlin. Berlin was born in Russia and came to America, just as my father’s father had done. In fact, both he and Berlin were born in the late 1800’s, within a few years of each other. Perhaps my granddad had named my father after Berlin, who quickly rose to fame in America. My dad and the composer had the same birth name of Israel, though both changed it to Irving later in life.

Berlin’s music as well as his life inspired me, both during and after my imprisonment. He was a survivor who didn’t let the prejudices of being an immigrant and a Jew get him down. He not only embraced America, but the nation came to fully love him. The country benefited greatly by having him as citizen. He wrote songs that penetrated the heart of America, and would remain so long after
his death, songs like “God Bless America,” “Easter Parade” and “White Christmas.” The only thing that Berlin couldn’t do well was play a musical instrument. But that didn’t stop him from writing great music. After he conceived the melodies, he had accomplished musicians prepare them as sheet music. Berlin also wrote the words. When I recorded my *Irving Berlin Songbook*, I had trouble deciding what to include since he wrote so many gems.

Coming close on the heels of Berlin in terms of quality and longevity of output was Richard Rogers. He outlasted two talented lyricists he worked with, Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein. Whether show tunes, jazz numbers or symphonic pieces, Rogers excelled. When the Sobin Guitar Trio recorded Richard Rogers’ songs, I made sure I started with his music from the Hollywood musical films I grew up with: *South Pacific*, *Carousel*, *The King and I*, *The Sound of Music*, and his first collaboration with Oscar Hammerstein in the year of my birth, 1943, *Oklahoma!*

I took special care in recording the music of Washington native Duke Ellington. He came of age on Capitol Hill just as two other famous Washingtonians did: FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and the military march composer and bandleader, Philip Sousa. When Ellington was born in 1899, Hoover was four years old. When Hoover became a top cop, Ellington sported a top hat and tails. When Hoover was pushing people around with his power, Ellington was pulling them in with the power of his music.

An advantage I had in recording Ellington classics such as “Satin Doll” and “Don't Get Around Much Anymore” was that I could hear him perform them with his own orchestra. The other great composers whose songs I recorded wrote them for other performers, not themselves. As a result, I could only speculate about how they wanted them to sound. But Ellington left a legacy of many fine albums. He recorded some of his songs more than once, and the interpretations varied depending on his mood. In the end, of course, I put my own spin on his songs. But I was always mindful of how the Duke did them so I wouldn’t stray too far afield. I think he would be pleased to hear the *Duke Ellington Songbook* as recorded by the Sobin Guitar Trio.

Yet another composer of American Standards that I wanted in my stable of interpretive CDs was Hoagy Carmichael. He’s not a household name like Gershwin and Ellington but I admire the man and his music no less. In fact my favorite song of all time was composed by Carmichael. It’s the love lament “Stardust” which was written early in his career in 1929. I’m not alone in liking this song. Few if any songs have been recorded more. He went on to compose
other hits, including “Georgia on My Mind.” But not as many as he might have during the next 42 years that remained in his life. That’s one of the reasons I admire Carmichael. He let his creative energies flow in different directions.

Like me, Carmichael was no stranger to the field of justice. He earned a law degree, working his way through school writing and performing music. For a time, he practiced law. But he was more interested in composing tunes than writing legal briefs, in singing and playing piano rather than performing in a courtroom. He never went back to the drama of law but he eventually became a dramatic actor. First in films, then on television. Always he kept his music flowing; from his pen, his piano, his voice. Carmichael lived the type of diversified and creative life that few other famous songwriters have achieved. By all accounts, he was a happy man to the end. Five years after his death in the 1980’s, his PBS television series Hoagy Carmichael’s Music Shop was still being watched and enjoyed in reruns. How could I not record the music of such a masterful innovator?

I recorded the Carole King Songbook because I greatly admired her work. She wrote for contemporary pop artists such as Bobby Vee and various “girl groups.” But her best music came in the 1970’s when she began to write for herself, including her hit “Natural Woman.”

The final CD I recorded during this phase of my CD productions was a departure from the others. I had developed a friendship and respect for a person named Lloyd Rubin who identified closely with the Jewish faith. I’d call him a Jew but that would let him off the hook too easily. Lloyd defies any type of stereotyping. While practicing that religion and supporting Jewish causes with his considerable financial resources, he is an earthy, often crude and sometimes shocking individual. Had he been a Catholic, he would have been ex-communicated from the church many times over. Had he been a stand up comic, he would have been a second Lenny Bruce, another Jew with decidedly secular and acerbic leanings. But Lloyd found his niche in business, developing a real estate franchise empire that became a household name. Becoming entangled in Wall Street finances, he pushed the envelope of traditional rules too far. The result was that he became a wanted man, destined to spend time in prison.

But Lloyd did not go gently into that good night. He fled an international posse that gave up only upon his “death.” The death was confirmed by reputable sources that Lloyd likes to brag about to this day. He enjoys getting people to see things through his own eyes.
Even in death he could be very convincing. Money and a strong personality can go a long way. When the truth surfaced about Lloyd’s survival, he was slapped by his distraught girlfriend and then slapped in handcuffs by police.

Prison made a big difference in Lloyd’s life. He saw the waste of potential there, both of government and human resources. Why couldn’t prison be turned into something more than a warehouse at best, a hate factory at worst. He took it upon himself to alter conditions with his funds, his ideas and his guts. Lloyd had something else going for him: a desire to be in the foreground rather than an anonymous benefactor. That’s unusual for someone of fame and fortune who has been to prison. Even Martha Stewart who wrote the Foundation while she was in prison to ask for our help (I still have her letter), turned her back on organizations like ours when she got out. Lloyd didn’t, though groups he offered to help turned their backs on him. His background wasn’t clean enough for them, which made his money less than acceptable. Had Lloyd been a person who had admitted guilt before going to prison, he would have gotten a better reception. But he always maintained that he had done nothing wrong except ruffle some feathers as an aggressive investor. He had never put a gun to anyone’s head or a hand in anyone’s pocket. Why then did he run and try to put himself above the law? For the same reason that the Jews hid from the Nazis. He didn’t think he would get a fair shake.

Non-profits working for prison improvement had a problem with Lloyd that went beyond his background. He knew more than most of them, and they sensed it. Few leaders of those groups had ever been to prison. It was as if they were studying the moon, though they had never been there. And they were horrified at the thought of ever going. In contrast, Lloyd laughed at his prison stay. He also wasn’t afraid to tell others the truth. Leaders like to lead, not follow. Lloyd is a leader who doesn’t know how to keep his mouth shut; not when he is privy to the facts. No wonder Lloyd also has a son who like mine is antagonistic to his father. Lloyd’s son is not just a lawyer but a sitting judge.

It’s no wonder that Lloyd gravitated to Jewish organizations that dealt with prison. Man might reject him, but God is open to all. Even an irascible ex-con who shoves his views on people as if he were in a jailhouse brawl.

Lloyd was introduced to me by a non-profit leader who refused his offer for help. He was passed along as a consolation prize and also because of his great interest in the arts. On behalf of my Foundation, I didn’t hesitate to snap him up.
There was no fooling Lloyd about the start-up nature of my prison arts and performances projects. He knew that after someone exits from prison, it takes a while to build up steam. Before running, you have to walk, and before walking, you have to crawl. I’d done my share of crawling at the homeless shelter and elsewhere. Now I was in the walking phase. Hardly knowing me, Lloyd his first comment was that I wasn’t walking right. My image lacked punch and professionalism, and he offered to change it.

He reminded me of a bold inmate I had met at Lorton prison who told me I stunk. I reflected on his comment and finally decided that he was right. I was new to the prison world and Lorton was the first stop on my prison journey. What I knew about prison at that point was grossly distorted, coming from popular movies. As a result, I avoided the showers at Lorton and bathed irregularly. I therefore had to agree with the inmate who told me I stunk. From then on, I showered every day, as I had before prison, and continue to do so today. Only once in prison did I have an unpleasant shower incident. A young man looking for love said, “You’ve got a nice ass.” I left the shower in a hurry, though secretly smiling at the compliment. Not bad for a 55 year old, I thought. He later apologized, saying he thought I was gay like him.

Besides the stink comment, I had another encounter with an inmate who also offered constructive criticism, however crudely. He said he didn’t like my looks and offered to do something about them. The man was John Caniglia, once the right hand of Mafioso John Gotti. I knew he meant business. That was at FCI Petersburg, the last stop in my 10-year sentence. By then I had learned to respect all prisoners and to appreciate their directness and rough edges. I looked at myself closely in a stainless steel mirror and realized that John was right. My hair was shaggy and my appearance unkempt. Without a visit in five years, I hadn’t cared. But I should have. It made John and the rest of my prison family look bad. So I took him up on his offer to have his personal inmate barber cut my hair. It was Christmas and I had a music performance in the chapel to give, at which outsiders would be present. Now I could smile at them without a grimace returned to me. The haircut was John’s Christmas gift to me. I reciprocated on Christmas day by handing John a large package of cookies not available at the canteen. It had been given to me by a staffer as part of a holiday gifts package distributed to inmates.

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Lloyd was no different in his forwardness and strong opinions than John. You can take a man out of prison, but you can’t fully take the prison out of the man. Finally, I met someone on the outside who spoke my prison-learned no bullshit, let’s-get-it-on language. Lloyd became the brother I never had, the father who never fully materialized in the flesh, the son who walked away. His candidness was even more refreshing because he had money, though only much later did I realize the full extent of his substantial funds and the magnitude of his generosity. Even when I started to run instead of walk, he had no trouble outpacing me.

The first thing Lloyd wanted to do was have the image of the Foundation professionally upgraded. He picked the professional who would do it. That’s how the Foundation’s logo and website came to be redesigned. It was the best investment we ever made and not just because Lloyd made it for us. If he hadn’t and we had to come up with the funds ourselves, it still would have been a wise decision. During the design process Lloyd only lost his temper once, but quite vociferously. I had delayed a decision and his designer, who was “on the clock,” was waiting to finish the work. “That kind of delay costs money!” Lloyd said.

Perhaps he had less money than I thought, I concluded. Whatever the basis for his outburst, I figured he had his own reason to fume. As we say in prison, “Complain all you want; Just don’t put your hands on me.” And even that must be tolerated sometime in the insanity of incarcerated life and post-prison adjustment.

A resident of Panama by choice, Lloyd’s first trip to Washington to see me was unforgettable. He traveled with his Rabbi, an orthodox and conservative man who seemed the direct opposite of Lloyd. I introduced them to Washington justice advocates I knew, but the Rabbi only shook hands with the men. Part of the Rabbi’s belief was that a holy Jew does not have physical contact with a woman who is not his wife. Lloyd on the other hand seemed ready to take his clothes off for women, considering the warmth he exuded during the introductions. It reminded me of a telephone conversation we once had. He curtly apologized for not getting back to me when he had promised to do so, adding “I got lucky.” What Lloyd and the Rabbi had in common was that they were both part of The Aleph Institute, Lloyd as president and the Rabbi as director. The mission of the group was to help nurture the spiritual development of prisoners and personnel of the military. I guess if members of either group prayed enough, they could get lucky too.

With the Rabbi in our midst, we had no choice but to eat at a Kosher restaurant. We found a plain place that charged more than it
should have for what we got. And Lloyd so noted. We took a cab and he complained about the cost of that too. On both occasions he was correct in his criticism. Even a wealthy man doesn’t like to be robbed. No wonder the restaurant had such little business. And why the fare system for DC cabs has since been revised downward. With newly installed cab meters, there is no more guesswork. Previously, an antiquated and ridiculous zone-based fee scale was used.

Another visit Lloyd made to DC took him to the Pentagon where he invited me and two of my Foundation supporters to a reception. Both of my guests were ex-prisoners who have done very well for themselves on the outside, one in the business world and the other in the academic arena. Lloyd had a choice of sitting at tables with military dignitaries and Jewish leaders or with me. He chose my ex-con table. “I feel more comfortable sitting with people who have a wider range of experience,” he said. That was my sentiment exactly. Sort of the difference between being surrounded by new recruits and battle-hardened soldiers. At our table, we had each other’s backs covered.

From the beginning I felt I knew Lloyd; even understood his unconventional brand of Judaism. I had studied with a rabbi during my years in prison. Rabbi Dennis Beck-Berman was not only a proud Jew but a man for all seasons. He wasn’t afraid to compare religions, their strengths and weaknesses. He did so objectively. A model of patience, knowledge and compassion, he was revered by all. Too bad he couldn’t join us at the Pentagon. He would have fit in well, having once been a chaplain at West Point where he also taught a non-religious subject.

The Jewish influence on me demanded that I record a CD that reflected it. That’s how the last album of initial recordings I made came to be produced. I filled it with more than an hour of Jewish music, including standards such as “Hava Nagila.” It also contained some of my personal favorites from Fiddler on the Roof. I had watched the movie several times and often played along with it at the chapel of FCI Petersburg. My CD began solemnly with the “Last Butterfly,” written during the Holocaust. Of course I couldn’t finish the album without inquiring about and including Lloyd’s favorite, which he said was the old Al Jolson chestnut “My Yiddish Mama.” A boy never wanders far from his mother, particularly a Jewish boy.

With my circle of friends, creative outlets, and justice initiatives expanding, my own mother would have been proud. She, as well as my son’s mother, deserves both credit and blame for what they produced.
Chapter 7

Origin of “From Prison to the Stage”
at the Kennedy Center

Unfortunately, as one’s scope of activities increases, there are bound to be repercussions. These can be minor annoyances or major obstacles, depending on the circumstances. Government officials and celebrities who get assassinated, whether a John Kennedy or a John Lennon, are not those who failed in their life’s work, but rather succeeded. Their enemies—suspicious, jealous and evil hearted—see them as pushy and overly ambitious.

Let me introduce again my two probation officers who continued to keep tabs on me. Suber seemed to be genuinely interested in my welfare and supportive of my growing creative outputs and spheres of influence. He was showing up less frequently and rarely got in my way.

But the other probation officer, Robocop, was something else. Influenced by and in close communication with my son, three incidents reflected his penchant for persecution. The initial one occurred when I first ended up in his cloying lap. He wanted me to go through a series of demeaning and unnecessary psychological tests. The man admitted that this was not common for probationers but he wanted me to undergo them nonetheless. My son’s idea. During my trial, my son had made wild and unsubstantiated allegations which had nothing to do with what I was charged with: the offense of speaking to his attorney in a court hallway. Now he had taken it upon himself to repeat his derogatory remarks to Robocop who saw them as an opportunity to push his unyielding, mechanical weight around.

First he tried to appeal to my good nature by asking me to submit to the tests voluntarily. He said, “This way you will get a clean bill of health when you pass the tests. The cloud hanging over your head since the Florida trial will blow away.” His approach was similar to a police officer asking to enter your home to go through your belongings without a search warrant. “If you have nothing to hide, you’ll let me do it.”

Did I have anything inside my brain to hide that would make me hesitate to let a search party of shrinks enter? No, but that was irrelevant. My serenity, not to mention my membership in the ACLU, was at stake. Never go along with a search, I have been advised. And for good reason. Results can be misunderstood or
misinterpreted. Plus you don’t want to give government hirings more leeway than they already have. That’s the way dictators get into power. Even cops who are under investigation by their superiors for wrongdoing do not cooperate any more than they have to. Upon advice from their labor union, which I admire, police officers do not consent to investigative interviews, unless they are under subpoena and have a lawyer present to protect their interests.

I refused to go to the couch willingly to be probed. Instead I filed a lawsuit against Robocop to try to stop him from forcing me to do it. I called his demand harassment. Little did I realize that he believed that annoying and antagonizing probationers was part of his job description. Only the good ones with gentle, reasonable hands like Sean Suber and another you will soon meet, Elizabeth Raible. She would come to replace Robocop after he short-circuited and self-destructed—approach their jobs.

In the end, I had to take the tests but I also won a small victory in court. Judge Deaf Dog who had sent me to jail at my son’s urging for 90 days had intensified his criticisms of me, but not in court. I ran into the man at a conference on elder abuse. I was attending this conference to tell my story of the financial exploitation and emotional blackmail I had received and continued to endure by my son and younger sister. The judge was also there as a speaker. So I publically asked him a question. His response was harsh, insensitive and unnecessary. It was captured by a government videographer who was covering the conference. Try as I did, I could not get a copy of that video of the judge talking to me in that way. I wanted to put it on my website. When I sued Robocop, however, I was able to get it. I made a deal with a government attorney who represented Robocop. She gave me the tape in exchange for my dropping the case against her client.

I dropped it because an attorney friend told me that I had no choice but to follow Robocop’s dictate and undergo the tests. I therefore proceeded to take them with cheerful anticipation. It never seemed a possibility that the tests would fail to exonerate me of any accusations by family or foes. They proved me innocent. Exoneration, finally! I was particularly pleased with the psychologist assigned, a thorough and competent man. He took his time and had me return for follow-up and cross-testing over a period of three weeks. If he couldn’t find anything wrong with me or any evidence of wrongdoing in my past, I knew no one could. Though it took a lot of time, it was easy for me to do. I simply spoke the truth, hiding nothing about my life, past or present. He gave me a clean bill of mental health which I
now refer to anytime someone brings up the false Florida accusations or makes other inaccurate statements about me. Robocop knew what he was talking about when he predicted that the cloud over my head would blow away if the test results came back in my favor. Sometimes, even evil dictators can be right.

Still, that’s no reason to take their abuse. A person who shoots you should not be dismissed lightly even if the bullet that enters your body somehow cures you of an ailment.

What next could I expect from Robocop? The answer came one day when he stormed into my home. Sadly, he didn’t need a warrant to do this as my probation officer, though he could not search the premises. He didn’t have to because he found what he was looking for: me. Maybe he was in a bad mood, or perhaps my son was when he fed him the latest lie about me. Who knows? My son had called Robocop to accuse me of being at his apartment window a few days before, which was in direct violation of the stay away order which mandated that I keep at least one hundred feet away from his residence. The accusation wasn’t true and I felt I could prove that. At the time that my son said he thought he saw me, I was at a movie theater seeing the Johnny Cash biopic Walk the Line. I even took the theater ticket to prove it.

Here are my son’s words: “I heard a tapping at my window and when I went to investigate, I saw a man walking away who walked like my father.” Either his imagination was running wild like the murderer in Poe’s story “The Tell Tale Heart,” or he was outright lying. To cover himself, just in case I had a foolproof alibi, he cleverly withheld a precise identification by the statement, “walked like my father.” Also, he couldn’t be sure of the time in the evening it happened.

A court date was set for the judge to hear the matter. With my son less than fully sure that the alleged man he claimed he saw was me, Robocop couldn’t ask for a revocation of my probation. He therefore asked for the next closest hardship. Something to make my life as miserable as possible. He requested, and the compliant far-from-objective judge with whom I had argued at the elder abuse conference authorized, that I be fitted with an electronic GPS leg bracelet so that my whereabouts could be determined at all times.

It was not a pleasant thing to undergo. I had to recharge the device nightly. It made wearing shorts in hot weather impossible since the ugly black ankle bracelet was visible. Anytime I went through a metal detector, I was searched and questioned about it. And what do you say to a woman after you have both taken off your clothes and are about to become intimate? That you are not really as
dangerous as this makes you appear? Better to lie and say it is a medical device to measure and monitor your pulse; and hope that this doesn’t dampen her sexual enthusiasm.

Of course Robocop tried to put a positive spin on the matter. It must have been part of his super cop training. “Look at it this way,” he said, “suppose your son says he sees you again crawling about and it really isn’t you. This way, you can prove where you were.”

I breathed deeply to maintain my calm when I heard him say this. But wouldn’t you know it? The day came when the bracelet saved me from another false accusation by my son. Since Robocop was on his side, neither one was pleased that I had an ironclad alibi on that occasion.

What happened was that a flyer about a concert in which I was performing in Washington was slipped under my son’s apartment door. He was shocked to find it there. Shocked! Who else but his father, he thought, would put it there? The apartment building was high-class and secure, not an easy place to penetrate if you didn’t live there. And I didn’t. Never set foot in or near the building, and had no desire to. How then did it get there? For logical minds, which excluded my son and Robocop’s, the commonsense possibilities of the flyer’s delivery without my involvement are not difficult to fathom. It had been circulated all over Washington. Since my name and my son’s last name are the same, a neighbor in his building had probably seen it and decided to provide my son a copy. Perhaps he or she was even aware of my son’s hostility towards me. Over the years, I have made no secret in media interviews about the problems in my family during and following my imprisonment. Knowing this, the neighbor who delivered the flyer remained anonymous to avoid getting involved. My son can be a hothead, and probably wouldn’t hesitate to kill the messenger who bore unwelcome news. When I say kill, I mean it in the metaphorical way that a lawyer kills with court filings and harsh arguments before a compliant judge like Deaf Dog.

In storming into my home following my son’s complaint about the flyer, Robocop flung his questions at me. How did I pull it off? What trick did I employ to get the flyer there? How did I defeat the GPS bracelet, which no one had ever done before? I apparently was not just evil but sneaky!

I asked him what he was talking about; then he mumbled something about the flyer. I acted dumb about it because I was dumb about it. He knew better than to press me and risk another law suit. Robocop set his sights on another target. He saw that I was not alone but in the company of a companion he had met before, a woman of
timidity but impeccable credentials. Robocop leaped toward her, surprise and confrontation being key weapons in his arsenal. “You did it, didn’t you? Dennis told you to put the flyer under his son’s door. He put you up to it, didn’t he?”

The woman was almost in tears. She had never liked this man and had always thought that he was capable of doing something like this. In truth, she didn’t like Suber much either. He had once asked her where the guns and drugs were hidden in her house for me. I always ignored such Suber-esque inquiries but she took them seriously. As in, “What the fuck have I gotten myself into knowing Dennis?” In the end, she got rid of the hassles of both Suber and Robocop by getting rid of me. What the hell, I might have done the same thing if I were in her high heeled shoes.

Robocop never solved the mystery of the flyer. He even later apologized for the outburst, though without any sincerity. A few months passed before his mood brightened again. He then took off the bracelet, never to demand that I put it back on. Unfortunately this happened under circumstances that I would have rather avoided; circumstances that would again shake my confidence in the justice system to the core.

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Meanwhile, the band played on, though for a while, my trio would be silent. I wanted to do more writing and performing before I undertook more CD recordings. There is nothing like playing live music for people to determine how to tweak your material.

The trio, of course, was just a virtual ensemble. While I could play all three parts of the music with ease in a studio, doing it live wasn’t feasible. I don’t say impossible because it could be accomplished. All I needed were two other guitarists to play the second and third parts. I even had two people in mind to do it, a husband and wife team who taught guitar and directed church choirs. They were full-time musicians whom I had worked with on church music projects. If a demand rose for the Sobin Guitar Trio to perform, I would call them, supply them with sheet music, rehearse once or twice and perform. I would have to pay them well to ensure that they showed up. In my own case, I always show up no matter the amount paid, or even without payment, as long as the job presents an exceptional justice or promotional opportunity. I didn’t have that level of confidence in others. Sometimes you only get what you pay for, particularly in dealing with professionals who need to make a living from their services. This is true even if you are dealing with
street musicians or street walkers. As Abraham Lincoln used to say about the legal profession, “time is our stock in trade.” I don’t mean to say that I would not have used my art to prostitute myself, only that I had longer term objectives than immediate compensation.

As it turned out, the prospect of the Sobin Guitar Trio performing live never materialized. That was a relief to me since assembling the group and getting them to sound like my recordings would have taken a lot of time. It’s always a drain to work with others in music and theater unless you are in absolute control, and then you have to deal with the label of being a tyrant. Film director Alfred Hitchcock fell in that category. He called his actors “cattle,” and treated them accordingly. Playwright Oscar Wilde rarely collaborated with others to avoid taxing himself. He once said, “I like it when I am the only one talking. It saves time and avoids arguments.”

To make my life easier and more productive, I never promoted the trio. I was too busy promoting the Foundation and myself. After all, I was both the trio and Foundation’s leader. I had created all of the trio’s musical arrangements and made its recordings. Who could know the material better than I? While my single guitar didn’t sound as good as three, there were things I could do as a soloist to compensate. For one, I could improvise, going off on a song in any direction I chose; sensing and shaping the rhythm to the vibes from the audience. That can’t be done as well with a trio when everything has to be planned and executed with precision. Three players must carefully follow sheet music so they will play in unison. Bad enough that any group, be it a small band or a large orchestra, is like an octopus with instruments as its tentacles. As a result, there is always some dissonance. But if the playing is not tightly controlled, the sound will not be good. With larger groups, even sheet music is not enough. There must also be a conductor. Duke Ellington conducted while he played piano, his 14 musicians paying close attention to his head and eye movements.

Beyond being able to improvise while playing on my own, I can fake it if necessary. For example, if I get a song request I’m not completely sure of, I can attack it in different ways until I get it right. Try to do that in a group and there might be bloodshed among its members. Also as a soloist, I can extend my performance if necessary. Remember what happened when I played during the Bush second inauguration? At the urging of the management, I kept going on and on. There was no conferring with others as to what to do or to ask if anyone was tired. Approval came from just one person, me. I
don’t know of anyone else who can put more energy into music, or take more musical chances than I am willing to do.

Don’t think of me as anti-social in any way, though every artist to some extent falls into that category. I greatly enjoy interacting with people through my music. During the years I spent at Cross City Correctional Institution in Florida, I had a good time playing in one band after another, all of them excellent. One killer band was particularly proficient since all of the men in it were lifers. They played songs well without regard to how long it took to arrange and rehearse them. Why not do it gradually with all that time on their hands? I call them a killer band for a reason other than their great skill. Each member, with the exception of me, had killed someone to get into prison. I felt proud that they had accepted me as an equal, which they intended as a compliment.

Playing with groups was good therapy and fun recreation in prison, but I wanted something different in the free world. More than to entertain, I wanted my music to communicate, to inform. That meant being able to move fast, to be self-reliant, to make creative decisions without answering to anyone but me.

I’ve played with others in religious ensembles on the outside. But that’s more akin to praying than performing. When you play under the auspices of a minister, priest or rabbi you are there as an incidental part of the services. Like playing in prison chapels, which gave me peace and serenity in good times and bad. I continued that on the outside. In many ways, prison time is less stressful than the period immediately following release. That’s especially true if you have to deal with probation officers or family members who are bent on your destruction, whether motivated by career advancement or avarice.

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Suber was the first to fall by the wayside. It happened a few months before my probation was over with him. He had been elevated to a better position, kicked upstairs to a supervisory role. A new probation officer in his section was assigned to me. I heard about him as someone who was supposed to be “difficult.” Yet he only came to see me once, and he fully behaved himself. A better mannered and more polite person would be hard to find. Obviously word had reached him that I would not be bullied. So he didn’t try. We chatted like old friends. Then he told me to stop by his office when I got a chance.
I never did, and he probably knew not to expect me. Rarely
does a probation officer extend such an open-ended invitation. They
want you to come in at a specific time. People who don’t show
“violate.” Had he asked me to show up on a certain day and time, I
would have done so. He probably knew that and feared it. Would I
arrive fully clothed? With legal papers to serve him? Accompanied by
an ACLU lawyer?

We both knew what he meant when he wasn’t specific. He
meant goodbye. Better to leave sleeping dogs and strong-minded
probationers like me alone.

Nonetheless, I eventually went to his office. It was after my
“supervised release” with his department had expired. I went as a
private citizen, which I had a right to do even though I had no legal
obligation or business to conduct. Why was I there? To speak my
mind, of course, though nicely. I can be tough when defending
myself, but I only do so when threatened. I don’t believe in firing the
first shot. Give those I confront the benefit of the doubt until they
prove me wrong. Only then will I get my dander up. Suber and his
replacement had been decent to me. Suber was even protective when
my son and sister sought my scalp.

I had come to the office where both men worked to leave an
envelope for Suber with the receptionist. Had I seen him walking in
the hallway, I would have given it to him directly. But I didn’t and
there was no need to use up his time or mine to request a meeting.
What I left for him was a note of congratulations about his promotion
along with a gift. It was the latest CD I had recorded. “For your file
on me,” I wrote, “now you can close it out with a song.”

Unfortunately at that time I was singing a different tune with
Robocop, the other probation officer from a DC probation agency and
the only one I now had to deal with. He had no intention of letting me
off the hook lightly. My son and sister had told me I was evil, and that
is what he believed me to be. I had to be careful how I walked, and
where. The bracelet on my leg would tell him my location at all
times. No wrong turns, no mistakes. It was an unsettling feeling to
know that an android—for surely the officer could not have been a
real human—could have such a strong say over my destiny.

Every time I saw him, which averaged once a week, we had a
minor battle of wills. I approached our meetings with more caution
than courtesy. For starters, I insisted that they be recorded. And I told
him why. I had no trust in him. Not when he helped engineer the
judge’s order for me to wear the electronic bracelet. Had he possessed
any compassion, he could have stood up for me in court as Suber had
done. But like many bullying bureaucrats, Robocop was spineless.
He saw power in my son and sister, but only an ex-prisoner in me. Rather than help someone who has been kicked to the ground, he adopted the safer course of joining in the kicking.

When I pushed for a recording of our meetings, he didn’t know how to respond. He went to his boss, who in turn consulted with others in his agency. My request was unusual. In some respects I was reversing our roles. I intended to watch him as carefully as he was watching me. When word came to me that a recording wasn’t possible, no particular reason was given. The denial seemed outrageous to me, a tacit admission of wrongdoing on his part. What could I do but threaten further court action, which I vociferously did? Before I could get a new set of legal documents filed, however, they agreed to a compromise. Each time I had a meeting with Robocop, there would be another person present as a witness. It would have to be their own person, but I didn’t care. Frankly, I didn’t know anyone I disliked enough to subject them to meetings with that contentious coward. Setting for one of the staffers there, I knew Robocop would have to behave at least a little better. And if the time ever came when my word about what had been said was pitted against his, there would be a potential fly in the ointment. This third person probably wouldn’t lie for the man. And if she did, the two of them would have to follow the same script exactly, not an easy thing to do.

What follows is a typical meeting. Rarely did the third person present say anything:

Robocop: Have you seen or had any contact with your son since I saw you last?

Dennis: You always ask the same question and I always tell you no. The only time I see him is in court, at his request when he wants to get a stay away order against me renewed. Or wants to put me in jail.

Robocop: No emails to him or any other form of communication?

Dennis: I have a lawsuit against me son, which is why I wouldn’t talk to him even if he requested it. Our communications will take place in the future strictly in court.

Robocop: Have you been using drugs or doing anything else I should know about?

Dennis: No. Your questions have no bearing on my background, which you know. You insult me when you ask them. Why can’t you
be like Sean Suber? He always treated me respectfully and stood up for me. He ended up getting a promotion, but all you end up doing is getting hauled into court when you step over the line.

Robocop: So you say you are following the order and staying away from your son?

Dennis: I have always stayed away from him. I was charged with violating the order and spent three months in jail not because I spoke to my son, but because I talked to his lawyer in the courthouse, and he spoke back to me. It was a pleasant conversation. Who in their right mind would think that such a harmless thing could get someone put in jail? Maybe in a banana republic, but in America? I’m feeling nauseous and respectfully ask permission to leave before I vomit here in your office.

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My conviction for my court hallway conversation with my son’s lawyer was on appeal. Even though I had already done my three months, there was another three months hanging over my head. That’s why I was on probation. If I “violated” I would go back to jail. On the other hand, then I wouldn’t have to wear the intrusive electronic shackle for another year or meet with insults and the loss of friends and lovers due to Robocop. Most of the inmates I met during my 90 days in jail thought I was crazy to agree to probation. I should spare myself the headache and just agree to do the additional 90 days. “Tell your probation officer to go fuck himself,” one thoughtful inmate said. But I thought I would be vindicated when the appeal was decided. That happened in time, but only partially. It proved to be too little too late.

In the meantime, I put up with Robocop, the bracelet, and the runaround I was getting from my son and sister as I used the legal process to try to get answers about the whereabouts of the money they had stolen. Now I was careful not to engage in any conversations with their lawyers. I had learned my lesson on that score. I wouldn’t be fooled again, or so I thought. But there is camaraderie among lawyers that belies their description as sharks. Or perhaps it is simply not in the nature of sharks to attack each other. After all, there have been a million cartoons showing sharks circling survivors on tiny shipwrecked islands. Why don’t they go after themselves? Why treat each other gently if they’re so vicious and hungry? Perhaps the answer is professional courtesy.
The two lawyers I had recently met through my son showed professional courtesy to my son of the highest order. One had testified against me about our hallway conversation, and the other, my son’s colleague in the DC Attorney General’s office, represented him and agreed to prosecute me. The attorney who testified against me exaggerated on the witness stand, thus committing perjury for my son. The city attorney, meanwhile, compromised her ethics and risked her job by helping my son in this “father and son matter” as Judge Liebowitz had described it.

Now a third attorney representing my son entered the picture. I wasn’t surprised since the money stolen from me was a considerable amount. Best to spend some of it on legal help so that the rightful owner doesn’t get it. The new attorney this time approached me. He did so both by email and by telephone. He explained that not only did he represent my son, but also certain doctors in my family. These doctors had once refused to treat me when they heard of the money dispute I was having with my son and sister. They decided to follow the money instead of their Hippocratic Oath. So I had filed a complaint against them because of it. In contacting me, the attorney wanted to know whether we could resolve all outstanding matters. It seemed too good to be true. Before I answered I checked out the lawyer’s background. My Internet search revealed that he was a reputable attorney. It also told me that he had represented men and women who had sought to exercise their constitutional rights. I couldn’t have been more pleased. Finally, an attorney I could trust, a shark of a different stripe, one I could get back in the water with. Remember too, he contacted me first. I had the email to prove it. How could I be faulted for telling him, hell yes, let’s get everything settled.

He asked me what I wanted and I told him. My number one concern was the money taken from me. This was tearing my family apart and I wanted to put it behind us. I was willing to be generous in the split since my own material needs were now being met. But I needed an explanation, perhaps even an apology. Something. My proposal was that my son resume the mediation sessions with me that he had once committed to doing.

The pleasant attorney said he would get back to me about my proposal, but he never did. The next time I saw the man he was in sitting in a witness chair preparing to testify against me. I had been set up. A trap that any father would fall into if he hoped for the best for his family. Love can be blind, and paternal love especially so. I should have known that a shark can’t change its stripes. My God, I
must have been thinking of zebras. A shark doesn’t even have stripes.

Don’t think of me as a sore loser. I admire my son for finding such barristers—three now and counting—who would toss aside caution, conscience and common decency in order to suppress a harmless senior and father. Where did he find them? Perhaps it takes one to know one, though I don’t mean this as sour grapes. In the end they did me a favor. Without these four lawyers, my son included, and their connivances against me, I would not have made it to the Kennedy Center and the wonderful outcome that resulted there.

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Robocop was happy to see me at our next appointment. Something had happened that pleased him, something that would not have the same effect on me. That’s when he sprang the news. I would have to appear in court for a revocation hearing. My conversation with my son’s lawyer was being used as a basis for asking Judge Deaf Dog to revoke me and send me back to jail.

I was tempted to explain the circumstances of the conversation with my son’s attorney, but how does one talk to a machine? Besides, Robocop was having a good time at my expense. Why spoil it? Forever an optimist, I felt I would prevail at the court hearing. As I look back, I was a smiling musician in the band of the sinking Titanic who didn’t think there was the remotest possibility that my ship would sink. How could I lose at the hearing when I didn’t initiate the conversation with my son’s lawyer? He had asked a question and I had answered it.

But the world of Wonderland hadn’t changed since the previous year when I faced the same Mad Hatter of a magistrate. My first instinct was to try to get rid of him. I came to court with a motion—a written legal request—to that effect. This is something my lawyer should have done, but he didn’t want to anger the judge. Why provoke a maniac, my lawyer told me, when he wouldn’t grant such a motion anyway. He had a point. But I had done my research and found that the judge had an obligation to remove himself from the case. We had an “out of court” encounter at the elder abuse conference where I had spoken as an elder and he as an abuser. Case law on this matter was clear: a judge had to remove himself from a case when he had had outside interaction with one of the parties that could give the appearance of impartiality. Since my attorney wouldn’t do it, I raised the motion for recusal myself.
My son’s colleague, the prosecuting attorney, immediately shook her blonde head and stood up in her elevated shoes to object. She said, correctly, that as long as I had an attorney, the motion would have to be made through him.

So I fired my attorney on the spot, something that we had both previously agreed upon if it came to this. She still objected, saying that if the judge allowed the motion to be heard, he would have to remove himself from the case. Like me, this woman had done her research. But the judge overruled her, an unusual act for this government-leaning magistrate. He didn’t do it as a favor to me. His purpose was to lay me bare so he could cut me to ribbons, even in the absence of case law to support the lacerating. He was the only one in the courtroom wearing a black bathrobe so he could do as he pleased.

The motion for recusal was overruled without logic or explanation. Let’s get on with the revocation hearing, he said. Now that I’ve lashed Sobin, let’s hang the bastard.

What could I do? I immediately re-hired my attorney. I needed some armament. Not that there would be much of a battle. Probation revocation hearings are notoriously arbitrary. That’s the main reason I tried to get rid of the Mad Hatter. He could do what he wished and no one would stop him. I eventually learned that even the DC Court of Appeals doesn’t get involved.

Remember, I wasn’t being charged with a new crime, as I had been at the previous non-jury trial in front of this judge. I must have done something right when I had spoken to my son’s attorney when he contacted me. No new charge. But I apparently didn’t act correctly enough since the judge ruled that by my willingly participating in that conversation and my expressing an interest in engaging in mediation with my son, I was somehow in violation. I wish, dear reader, I could express this more clearly, more sensibly. But I am not an expert on convoluted law, only a victim of it.

Let me fast forward in time for a moment and relate what explanation was given when the appeals court ruled on what the judge had done at both my trial and the revocation hearing that sent me back to jail a year later. First, the appellate ruling about the trial. The three-judge panel that decided my appeal said that Judge Deaf Dog may have been extreme in his ruling and sentence of me, but he was “not clearly in error.” One of the three judges on the panel gave me some degree of comfort by writing a separate decision. In it he said that my punishment was harsh for my speaking to my son’s attorney in the court hallway, but it was within the law. He wanted to make clear, however, that judges have limitations. They cannot use any
opportunity to send someone harmless, like me, to jail. He even noted there were circumstances in which I could pick up the phone and speak to my son directly. It surprised me that he would give me such latitude. If I were deathly ill, he said, I could call my son, and if his “favorite aunt” died, I could deliver the news to him.

This appellate judge obviously knew a great deal about my family. I should not have been surprised. With only 572,000 inhabitants, Washington, DC, is a relatively small town. Without question, my sister was my son’s favorite aunt, and not just because of the theft of my money they jointly accomplished. His only other aunt, his mother’s older sister, got him arrested once, a subject we will come to later. The prescient appellate judge concluded his opinion with a stern warning to the trial magistrate who had sent me to jail. Deaf Dog had pushed the envelope of the law against me to the limit. He must not venture beyond that point in the future.

Unfortunately, this appellate ruling was not written by the time my abysmal probation revocation hearing occurred. Shamefully, two years or more are needed for appeals to be decided in DC. I had been waiting just a year before the revocation hearing occurred. As a result, Deaf Dog had no hesitation in continuing to beat me up for my innocuous conversations with my son’s lawyers. He sent me to jail on the spot, ordering that my probation end then and there and that I serve the last three months of the six month sentence he had imposed.

This time I went quietly. No fainting, no scene, no music. Having appeared before this off-with-your-head judge once already I didn’t expect the slightest degree of reason or mercy from him. I had already decided what books I would read and what creative projects I would undertake during my new 90-day seclusion. Really a vacation, not much different than an ocean liner voyage. It would be like a cruise around the world, but without the seasickness. And since the DC Jail is close to home, I could expect regular visits.

In fact, I got my first one within five minutes of being “stepped back.” That’s a polite term used by lawyers and judges who haunt the courthouse. It refers to incarcerating someone who had been free when he or she walked into the courtroom. I had barely gotten to the holding cell behind the courtroom when Robocop appeared. For once, I welcomed him, even with a pair of scissors in his hands. There was a look of disappointment on his face. Not that he was unhappy about my being in jail; he knew I always belonged there and surely wished it were for 90 years instead of just 90 days. But he now had the sad task of removing the electronic bracelet from my ankle. My probation and the bracelet, thank God, had come to an end. In spending the next 90 days reading and relaxing in an air-conditioned
jail cell during Washington’s sweltering summer. I had spared myself Robocop for a full year, along with his lying tongue and the sadistic tools of his trade. No longer could he use his computer in conjunction with my electronic appendage to track my whereabouts. He would have to return to watching S & M sex video clips, or whatever he did to amuse himself and/or get erections before I came on the scene.

Sitting in that holding cell, I took a long breath of freedom while simultaneously rubbing my newly-released ankle. I smiled to think that the device wasn’t there and would not be again. When getting out of jail in a dozen weeks, I would report to no one but myself.

The next time I saw Robocop, about eight months later, it was by accident. He walked up to me and asked me if we could chat. I politely told him to go screw himself. “My lawyer advised me not to talk to you,” I said. The inspiration for this fib came from a sign I had seen at the zoo about not feeding animals. I would not nourish this jackass before me with another word.

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The DC Jail was starting to look like home. Not a permanent one, more of a vacation home. In one sense, it’s the ideal getaway. You needn’t take anything with you, not even money. Everything is provided when you get there. I arrived in time for dinner, which I enjoyed. It’s simple fare, but that’s the way I usually eat. As a result, my clothing size hasn’t changed in decades. Even as I write these words at the age of 65, I remain trim and fit. You don’t get your own refrigerator in jail, so the temptation for in-between meals or snacks is minimal. Food can be bought from the jail canteen, but the selection is limited; items are often out of stock. Plus, you can only make purchases one day a week. If you don’t like potato chips, soups, candy and a few other things offered, you are out of luck. On the other hand, you’ll be able to keep the pounds off with minimal effort. All you have to do is lie back and go with the flow. Jail can be the ultimate fat farm. Compared to other weight reduction programs, it has an unusual feature that practically guarantees success. One can’t quit midway and walk away. Only when your sentence is over can you check out.

As a vacation home, it may leave something to be desired. In fact, a number of things. But that’s only if you’re looking for amenities that one often finds in travel brochures: pools, beaches, scantily clad swimmers, lavish and overpriced food, exotic drinks and other such things. All of them can lead to health and stress problems.
That’s why a lot of people toss the brochures and take simpler vacations. Camping, hiking, a cabin in the mountains. Anything that provides a change of scenery but not a reduction in savings or one’s mental state. From that standpoint, what could be closer to home and less expensive than a local jail? True, you can’t regulate the length of your vacation there. A judge does that. But once you know what it is, you can plan your time accordingly. People you leave behind may be unhappy about your departure, particularly if it’s for a lengthy period. But don’t let their unhappiness rub off. For the purpose of maintaining a positive outlook, think of yourself as now part of the leisure class, and those left on the outside as members of the working class. Who’s to say who’s better off?

When I arrived at my vacation destination in time for the evening meal, I had my full three-month agenda mapped out. The books I chose to read and the creative projects I undertook could be done at a leisurely pace. Being on the inside, time was in my corner. Let the battles of war, the economy and the social scene rage on the outside. They didn’t affect me. I was tucked away securely and had everything I needed to lead an easygoing yet productive life.

For veteran vacation goers who wind up at this no frills, no cost, no demands destination, there is one primary concern. Who will be your roommate? Rarely are there single rooms available, although I was once fortunate enough to have one. Commonly, there are two people to a room. It’s the same on a college campus or cruise ship. As in those situations, if you get stuck with someone with whom you’re not comfortable, you can relocate to new quarters. In jail you say, “I don’t want any trouble, so please move me.” The officers will usually comply since they don’t want any trouble either. A fight means paperwork and possibly a lockdown of the cellblock if it is severe. That means even more work and labor for them. During a lockdown, meals have to be delivered to inmates rather than having them venture forth to the dayroom to get their own.

Generally speaking, I have had very considerate and well-behaved roommates in jail. And when they weren’t I find them to be interesting. The latter have been more valuable to my creative writing than the others. They have interesting stories to tell, and no one but their roommates to tell them to. These men have inspired much of my fiction, nonfiction and music. All I have to do is lie down and listen. What could be an easier way of doing research into the lives of fascinating characters? As I listen, I take mental notes, which I later transfer to paper when alone. I am considered a good listener because I find the stories of inmates genuinely interesting. Plus, I never impose my own views or value judgments. Curiously, no one
has ever admitted a crime to me for which they haven’t already been convicted. Whenever I read in the newspapers that someone has made a jailhouse confession to a cellmate, I am skeptical. I’ve listened to hundreds of stories, and not once has such a confession been made. Inmates may have made dumb mistakes to end up in jail, but they’re not so stupid as to open their mouths while there and spoil their chances for a fair trial. On the other hand, there are enough prisoners who want to get out who will lie about having heard such confessions. It might be their only ticket to an early release.

As it turned out, my 90-day stay in jail paired me with someone who was difficult to live with. He was a sad sack to end all sad sacks, having been thoroughly screwed by his wife. Not surprisingly, she was also the person who put him in jail. Like me, he had been convicted of violating a stay away order. Also like me, he was guilty of stupidity, though not the offense itself. He and his wife had been separated when he got a call from her. She was lonely and wanted him back. That night. What about the stay away order she had gotten to keep him away after he had made a minor pest of himself by repeatedly contacting her to seek reconciliation? She told him that since she was inviting him back the order did not apply. Besides, no one but the two of them would know about it. It seemed logical, like my son’s lawyer contacting me to ask for my terms of a settlement.

The night they spent together was blissful but she woke him up in a fit of anger. She had gone into his pants pockets for change and found another woman’s phone number. She wanted him out immediately. He tried to reason with her, which was a big mistake. Her anger intensified to the point that she lost control and physically attacked him. He showed me her claw marks on his arms and face. He didn’t try to defend himself, which made her even angrier. Her favorite words for him—wimp and loser—were used. He went to his car to compose himself, too upset to drive. A few minutes later, the police arrived and arrested him. She had called 911 to register a complaint. He was charged with violating the stay away order, which she duly showed the police. That she invited him there didn’t matter, said the police. He knew the stay away order was in effect and he had violated it. Next time she invited him, they said, he needed to get her to rescind the order in court so that he could comply legally. They were just doing their job. Enforcing the law. Nothing personal.

He was an interesting cellie though illogical in that he was still stuck on her. The more I roomed with this man, the more I agreed with his wife that he was a wimp and a loser. Why else would he want her back? If he didn’t have any respect for himself, why should she? Why should I? Still, I agreed with him that he was an innocent
man. To violate a stay away order, you have to know you’re in violation. He didn’t. Yes, he knew about the order but he assumed under the circumstances that she had waived it, that such a waiver was possible. Just as I had made this assumption with my son’s lawyer. One often hears, “ignorance of the law is no excuse.” That doesn’t apply to stay away orders. If a person isn’t aware that it exists or is applicable to a certain situation, he or she can’t be guilty of violating it. To render a non-guilty verdict a judge need only decide that the alleged lawbreaker is stupid enough not to know. Obviously the judges who presided over the cases of my roommate and me didn’t think we were that ignorant. But in fact we were. Sometimes a thirst for sex or to reclaim one’s stolen inheritance can override common sense.

The difference between my cellie and me was that I was willing to let the past go while he was not. I’ve heard that a definition of insanity is repeating a past action and expecting different results from it. If that’s the case, my roommate was insane. He was ready to trust her again, and he intended to put himself in harm’s way to demonstrate that. Even from jail he wanted to contact her. Write letters, make phone calls. Surely she wouldn’t turn on him again. Not when she realized how much she meant to him. How much? He couldn’t live without her, and would tell her so. If she didn’t agree to take him back, he would kill himself. Right here at the jail. In our cell. And he meant it.

I tried to get him to talk about other things. The jobs he held throughout his life, his family, his growing up years. But he made it all sound depressing, which perhaps it was. Worse, all roads led back to her. He was like a defective CD that kept repeating itself.

In the end I had to get away from him. Not that I was fearful about my safety, but I was worried about his. At my hands. My patience extended just so far. The repetition, the complaining, the groaning. If he didn’t kill himself soon, I would do it for him. I got compensated somewhat when I used him as a character in a novel I wrote, one of the creative projects I completed during my three months at the DC jail.

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Writing prose or music is always an intense, energy-consuming process. Doing it on the outside is more difficult than on the inside because of the obligations and distractions one faces in the free world. Even if you are wealthy, you have bills to pay. While you can have someone pay them for you, you still have to hand them
over, decide if they’re being paid properly, and exercise some degree of supervision. Having a staff to satisfy your needs, you need to let them know what your needs are. These staffers also need to be retained in the beginning. Not only must you do the hiring but also the letting go and replacing.

You might be someone of independent wealth writing books or songs or creating art. But there will be distractions that you must contend with. Whether amenities or friends, they are the enemies of creative output. In prison, you don’t need friends. It’s also easy to pass up the few amenities offered. You don’t need anything but your mind, pen and paper. They’re easy to find behind bars. Everyone writes, whether letters or legal briefs.

If you let go of the past and focus on the future, your mind will adjust and function well in your new home. A creative mind doesn’t like to be cluttered. Not even the distraction of a watch is needed in jail. I measured time by the number of pages I wrote each day, knowing that when I completed my self-imposed quota of 10 pages I could take the rest of the day off to read or study music.

I wrote a novel, a play and a non-fiction work about other prison artists I had known. All of this writing would find a publishing home through my Foundation. What excited me the most was a one-man musical I decided to write called Jail Songs and Reflections. Completing it was the highlight of my second 90-day sentence.

It was an autobiographical piece that served the dual purpose of being personal and yet trying to be relevant to others. I sought to answer questions often posed to me: How did I come to have this artist’s life and adapt it so well to jail? How could my experience be relevant to others?

I started Jail Songs and Reflections by outlining the project and then taking notes of whatever came to mind regarding my creative output and most memorable experiences in jail. The play wouldn’t just be about me but would include others who reacted to jail creatively rather than destructively. Over the years I gathered much knowledge about and insight into such people. Many of them, like songwriters Leadbelly and Merle Haggard, I only read about. Others I met in person.

It occurred to me as I wrote the words and music for Jail Songs and Recollections that prison is a timeless place. It’s where the lives of people are slowed down, almost encased in ice. They could be from an ancient era or a modern society. It doesn’t. Their human instincts and the mechanisms they use for adjustment and survival are the same. The jail setting brings out the best and worst in people. There are exceptionally talented men and women in prison. Stars
behind bars, I call them; people who write, think, play music, create art, sing, perform comedy and do a host of other things that would lead to recognition on the outside. Even on the inside they receive support. I’ve never heard more enthusiastic and sincere clapping than I have in jail. It’s enough to make you cry, as I did on several occasions. I realized that there is no way to incarcerate a spirit that demands to be free.

I often marveled at how people could leave prison without a chip on their shoulders. After all, they had ended up inside through no real fault of their own. That’s not to exonerate anyone who hurts someone, who commits bodily harm or theft. But the majority of people in prison today do not fall into that category, having violated laws that enforce conformity rather than punish behavior destructive to others. In any case, people do not violate laws unless they feel justified in doing so. Why does society punish such people? It seems nonsensical and sadistic. Sure, we want to protect citizens from vicious and larcenous individuals among us. But protection is different than punishment. Imagine capturing a poisonous snake. Do you taunt the animal, subject it to deprivations and torturous treatment? What good will that serve? When dogs are trained to be seeing-eye animals or some other useful purpose, they aren’t treated badly by their trainers. They are given incentives and rewards for the smallest degrees of progress. Locking them away in substandard care for days, weeks, months or years will not produce better canines. Just the opposite will happen.

That men and women treated badly in prison react somewhat better upon release than animals is a testament to the human spirit. I sought to capture this determination in *Jail Songs and Recollections*. At the same time I wanted to include material about loved ones on the outside who do not give up and turn their backs. They are the unsung heroes that I wanted to sing about in the most enthusiastic of ways.

In creating my jail-written musical, I approached it in a very methodical way. I listed various topics and personalities I wanted to address. Then I wrote a song about each. I made sure that the style of the songs reflected their subjects. For example, if a song dealt with a romance between a prisoner and a sweetheart outside, I created a love ballad. In addressing a situation of fear and anxiety, I gave my music a strong blues feeling. A happy, up-tempo song related to an inmate about to be released. I didn’t stop at the gate of the jail but followed ex-prisoners into their community with varying song styles, depending on the reception they received.

Between the tunes, I wrote dialogue that served to introduce and comment on each musical selection. Constructed as a one-man
show, I wrote plenty of material for it. I had the time; why not take advantage and maximize it to the fullest. It’s always better to have too much rather than too little material.

The only obstacle I faced as I undertook this project in jail was that I was writing a musical without a musical instrument. That didn’t stop me, however. It didn’t even slow me down. I was inspired by the example of Ludwig Beethoven who also composed without instruments. Like me, he didn’t have access to them, even though he wasn’t in prison, not in a conventional prison anyway. He became deaf early in life, which put the great composer in a state of isolation that sound could not penetrate. Musical instruments as an aid to songwriting were useless to him. Still, most critics say that he composed some of his most outstanding work while deaf. Beethoven himself was aware of this and advised his students to follow his lead. Compose with your imagination, not with an instrument. So pleased and thankful was I to Beethoven for this advice that I wrote a song in my play about him and the personal imprisonment he grandly overcame.

Once a songwriter gets the hang of it, composing without an instrument is easy. Sometimes too easy. What you write has to be playable by others. Otherwise, it’s useless since it can be heard only in one’s mind. Both Beethoven and I fell into that trap somewhat. Sections of some of his pieces written at the height of deafness are beautiful but too difficult to play. That’s how good he was. He conceived of passages that were ahead of their time, technically brilliant to the point that no one could play them. In contrast, some of the things I wrote didn’t make much sense musically. I knew it but didn’t care. In art you can’t be a perfectionist or you’ll never complete anything. Sometimes you have to plunge in and take your chances. Then call it a wrap when you sense you’ve done your best, however imperfect that might be.

I was physically rested but creatively exhausted when I walked out of the DC Jail. My second three-month sentence there was as productive as the first. The heavy clear plastic bag that an officer had given me to carry my possessions was filled with the results of my artistic creations. I felt like Santa Claus coming out of a tight chimney. Like St. Nick, I felt satisfied in completing my mission. The bag would have been heavier had I not given so much away, including my most cherished possession in jail: a modern dictionary that had been sent to me. Since I could easily replace it now that I was free, I gave it to another inmate. The same for books, pens, paper, pencils and other items that were my lifeline to sanity and productivity there. Aside from their nostalgic value, they were not
important anymore. To have taken them with me and thereby deny the men I left behind their use would have been a crime. And I am no criminal despite the opinion of my son and sister and the judicial puppet they talked into sending me to jail twice.

As I walked away from the steel and concrete complex that housed me and over 2,000 other “vacationers,” the heat hit me quicker than the reality of my freedom. It was early August 2006, and I was in a location that had once been a swamp before it was taken over as the seat of national government and named Washington, DC. I was anxious to get my hands on a guitar and a woman again, in that order. Fortunately both were waiting for me. I lived only a few blocks from the jail; it was a short walk home.

Over the next week I satisfied my curiosity about the music I had written in a way that Beethoven could not. Plucking the strings of my guitar, I played through all the songs I had composed in jail. I now heard how they sounded and was generally pleased with the results. My music note writing had been in standard form, just as any trained musician would notate, including Beethoven. My education had resulted from self-training, accomplished during my years in prison. The big vacation. But that didn’t compromise me in the least. Standard music notation is the same whether you learn it at Julliard or the federal penitentiary, or whether you live in the 18th or the 21st century.

Not being Beethoven, I knew that my songs needed work. The musical notes I wrote did not fully match the melodies I had conceived in my head. But they came close. All I had to do was modify the notation. Then I would have songs on paper as I had imagined them. Upon hearing them sung with guitar accompaniment, I decided if I truly liked them. In some cases, I didn’t. Making changes was easy enough. In jail I had written everything in pencil. Now all I had to do was erase and re-write. Usually it only involved adding, deleting or changing a few notes to get the songs to my liking.

I wasted no time recording them. Doing so was simple since they were newly written and fresh in my mind. Best to get them on CD while they were fully internalized. With my own studio I could take whatever time I needed to finish the project to my satisfaction. Working day and night, even canceling a non-essential trip to New York, I got the recording completed before the end of the month. That included mixing all the songs since I used two tracks to record them. One track for my guitar, the other for my voice. Mixing is a process of blending tracks together; balancing the volume of one against the other in a way that listeners find pleasing. When I do mixing, I feel like I’m playing an additional instrument. As I listen
intently to the tracks, I raise and lower the volume of each at various points in the song. In that way I achieve the emphasis of phrasing and the effects I want.

The easiest part of recording *Jail Songs and Recollections* was doing the dialogue between songs. I had written every word of it in jail, even doing a few edits to get it the way I wanted. I might have been unsure about the notes in some of the songs, not being able to play them on the inside. But there was no guesswork in the dialogue. I even timed each section to make sure it wasn’t too long or too short. When I left jail with this material, I was ready to record. I had carefully hand-printed the dialogue so I could smoothly read it in front of the microphone. Typing it was unnecessary.

I had conceived the dialogue to be recited with my guitar playing in the background. I knew which songs I would play for accompaniment because I had thought through and listed all of them in jail.

It was fortunate that I was so well prepared to do the recording. I had a deadline looming. It was a once a year event that presented a good opportunity for songwriters, playwrights and producers to get word out about their work. Known as the Page-to-Stage Festival, it takes place on Labor Day weekend at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts each year.

Selling my creations after their completion is what I do for relaxation. It gets me out of the house, out of the studio, out of my own skull. When marketing, whether music, art, writing, refrigerators, or cars, you have to put yourself in the minds and hearts of others. Just the opposite is true when you artistically create. Then you have to engage in introspection of the most intense and personal nature. If what you create doesn’t reflect your own feelings, people will sense its falseness. As a fake you will be spinning your own wheels without a satisfactory outcome. If what you produce isn’t rewarding to you, there’s little chance it will be satisfying to others. Singer-songwriter Ricky Nelson put it well in his tune “Garden Party” which he wrote after he was booed in a concert at Madison Square Garden. He tried to appeal to the audience there instead of following his own heart. Coincidentally I was in the massive crowd that night and could feel the anguish he suffered. When he later released his song about the experience, it resonated with many people, including me. It taught a lesson I will never forget. Nelson sang, “It’s alright now, I’ve learned my lesson well; you see you can’t please everyone, so you’ve got to please yourself.”

That isn’t always easy since artists tend to be highly self-critical. Think about what motivates artists in the first place. They
create because they believe the work of other artists isn’t good enough for them; that it doesn’t speak to them, doesn’t grab them. We artists put ourselves on a higher pedestal than others. We only fake modesty. In truth we are extremely proud of our work and are always comparing it to the work of others. Our need to be on top demands we be original and push the envelope of our imagination as much as possible. As Nelson sang in a verse of “Garden Party”: “If you gotta sing at garden parties, I wish you a lot of luck, but if memories are all I sang, I’d rather drive a truck.”

Every time I put on my marketing hat to push my work, I’m in effect driving a truck, sometimes literally as I go from place to place with my artist wares. But I first have to package my work. With my marketing targets in mind, I do the best I can. To pay the rent, I know that my packaging and pitch have to be good.

When I heard about the annual Page-to-Stage Festival at the Kennedy Center, it seemed like an ideal opportunity for a playwright and composer like me to find a producer for his work. The festival runs each Labor Day weekend: Saturday, Sunday and Monday, all day and into the evening. Much of the Kennedy Center—its various stages and performance spaces—are used for the festival. Dozens of dramatic and musical presentations take place. All are free and open to the public. The best-known theaters and production groups in the region are there. They use the opportunity to present new works to the theater-going public. Sometimes it’s material “in development,” in other instances it’s finished pieces that have already been scheduled for production at a theater. In that case, the Page-to-Stage Festival gives audiences a chance to preview the work. The hope is that if people like what they see, they’ll dig into their pockets and buy tickets when it opens, which could be as far as a year off. At the Kennedy Center they will usually only experience excerpts, typically readings rather than fully-staged productions. Still, it’s an inspiring and entertaining three-day event. And the price couldn’t be better, being free. Whatever your taste in theater—comedy, drama, song, dance—you will get a healthy serving at the Page-to-Stage Festival.

I had just a few days to prepare to market my work at the festival by the time I completed the recording and mixing of Jail Songs and Recollections. But it was enough time to do what I needed to make a good presentation. My first task was to explain what I had done. I didn’t want anyone to know that I was fresh out of jail where I had done the writing and composed the music. Or that my lawyer son had put me there after I sued him and my sister to account for my missing inheritance. That would have made my family look too evil and me too stupid. I was presenting a serious musical, not a comic
operetta. The Sobin family, after all, was not the Munsters, despite our bizarre internal politics and ghoulish interpersonal relations. In my cover letter to potential producers at the festival I emphasized my background in activism and my previous experience behind bars. I had used those episodes, I said, to compose the songs and dialogue of my musical. Surely the public would want to hear about prison. Even better, to listen to songs about it.

Beyond my cover letter, I packaged the CDs that made up the musical as a cohesive unit. There was more than one CD because the show ran for more than an hour. Much more. I needed three CDs. I realized that this was excessive for a one-man show. Presenting such a lengthy performance could tax the stamina of any audience. The performer himself might even decide to leave. I explained in the cover letter that the show was this long to allow a theater to keep or cut what it wanted. This struck me as a brilliant idea, although I now consider it asinine. A theater producer—a good one anyway—doesn’t have a lot of time to listen to much material. It would have been better if I had presented a smaller portion of the work on a single CD. I could have then noted in my cover letter that there was more material to pick and choose from to make the play suitable for any audience. And if they didn’t believe me they could go to my website, www.dennisobin.com, where I had placed the entire recording. It’s still there for free and easy downloading.

To complete my presentation package I included three recent *Washington Post* articles and other media stories about my endeavors, both in activism and in the arts. My unstated message was that I could get their theater noticed if they hooked up with me. To wrap up the packaging, I inserted the three CDs and the supporting materials in a large envelope. On the outside, I affixed a logo I had created for the project. Fifteen of these presentation kits were assembled. That might not be enough for the many producers I felt I would meet at the Kennedy Center. Perhaps even the thousands in the audience would want a copy. I would have to be highly selective, I thought.

Before the festival began, I carefully examined its multi-day program, a copy of which I found on the Kennedy Center website. It took me a while to decide which events to attend. Although I intended to be there for the entire three days, many of the shows were taking place at the same time on different stages. I had to decide which ones were closest in theme and content to my own work. That way I could find producers who would be amenable to receiving and considering my creation.

I headed to the Kennedy Center with high hopes. How could I fail at such a mammoth festival? It seemed tailor-made for a
playwright and composer who had something fresh and interesting to offer. Mine wasn’t run of the mill fare. Nor was I a novice. I had paid my dues. If two stints at the DC Jail weren’t enough payment, I didn’t know what was. Suppose more than one producer wanted the play? Or word spread about the potential value of it to others? It could touch off a bidding war. I’d need legal representation. I’d have to increase the minutes on my cell phone for the many incoming calls. And keep it close at hand so that I would get the winning call and conclude a deal quickly to end the clamoring. I’d put the phone on vibrate when I was busy meeting with producers, then listen to and prioritize the messages later. The producer who sounded most enthusiastic about *Jail Songs and Recollections* and offered the best credentials would get the first call back. But I’d give everyone an opportunity to be heard. Being in jail humbles anyone, even a creative person who finds success at the Kennedy Center within weeks of his release. Let the country’s top producers fight over me; all would have an opportunity to be heard and considered. No one would accuse Dennis Sobin, even at the height of fame and fortune, of being a snob.

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People who are kind to me, including my many friends, say that I am an extreme optimist. Those who are not kind, primarily certain members of my family who have their financial reasons for keeping their distance from me, say I am out of touch with reality, a dreamer who doesn’t know when to stop dreaming. As matters turned out in my approaching producers at the Kennedy Center, I could see the point of the detractors.

I could barely get the time of day out of these producers, and then only when I asked what time their own shows began. I already knew that information from the schedule, but I needed some way to break the ice. Perhaps if I could thaw them while they spoke about their own work, I could interest them in mine. The ones who expressed an interest were likely acting, but weren’t very good at it. Maybe that’s why they were producers instead of performers.

Let me back up for a moment and tell you what I saw when I arrived at the Page-to-Stage Festival. I came into a setting that featured everything from first-class traditional theater to highly experimental works. I mean *highly experimental*. There were also plays in development. One in fact was being developed right in front of my eyes. It was called improvisational theater.
I spoke to producers when I could find them. That wasn’t always easy. I guess I wasn’t the only one who sought to bend their ears, or in their opinion, perhaps to compromise their standards. In other instances, the producers were easy to locate. They were the presenters of one-person productions who constituted the entire cast.

I was persistent, however, and managed to speak to a number of producers who took responsibility for the work being presented. In the end, I wasn’t selective at all. To each of them I gave my CD package. There were more than enough kits to go around. Even if they were not producers in the traditional sense, or so miniscule that they relied on handouts to pay their rent, I thought they might know someone who might be of value to me.

In approaching these people, I had a set monologue rehearsed. I didn’t say that I had a work that I needed a producer for. Nor did I indicate that I saw them as someone who could help. Does a car salesperson tell a person looking at a car, “Please buy it?” No. The salesperson plays a game of give and take. What do you think of this auto? It’s got a lot of features, perhaps exactly what you’re looking for in a car?

I told the producers that I had created something that I wanted their opinion about. Would they please take it for a test ride and get back to me at their convenience. All were agreeable, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. They promised me that they would respond with their comments. I waited. Three years later, I am still waiting. Not one kept their word. I guess it was a theater promise. Like promising backers they’ll get their money back ten-fold. Or even one-fold. It occurred to me toward the end of the festival that I didn’t have anything bankable to walk away with. Even if anyone responded, what would the response be? Do I keep coming back year after year, saying my prayers and writing new material between festivals? I’d be 63 on my next birthday. Maybe at 23 I’d do it, but at my age I needed to move upward, and quickly.

“Who’s in charge here?” I used a voice of urgency mixed with courtesy as I approached one of the more mature Kennedy Center ushers. It took me a while to track him down, but I finally came face-to-face with Gregg Henry. He’s the Kennedy Center staffer who makes the Page-to-Stage Festival happen. He was busy, surrounded by assistants, but he gave me time to make my pitch. About 60 seconds. It was all I needed.

I changed my strategy entirely. No longer was I a newcomer writer and composer looking for a producer. Instead, I was an experienced producer looking for a venue. In my one minute I told him about the Foundation. It occurred to me during the festival that
the Foundation was as large as some of the small groups represented there, and probably no less experienced. Moreover, we had a unique niche that wasn’t being met at the festival: work created by men and women in prison. I even told Henry about the Prison Art Gallery so I could brag about the Foundation covering all the arts. With about eight seconds remaining, I handed him the envelope with my own work as “an example of what can be created behind bars. I know this first hand,” I added, “because I created this in jail.”

In Gregg Henry I saw a person who took his role in producing the Page-to-Stage Festival seriously. He seemed to get what I was saying right away: contributions from the many aspiring playwrights and composers among the two and a half million men and women in prison could add a lot to his event. Let me have a stage for the Foundation, I said, and your festival will be better off. What do you have to lose since you can always kick us out if we don’t come through?

He looked at one of his assistants at his side, turning away from me as if I had evaporated. He said to her, “Let’s do it!”

When he turned back to me, he nodded and said, “Maybe we can also use some of the prison-made art from your gallery to decorate the Center during the next festival.” I assured him that we could do anything he wanted. I imagined that we could even transport the entire building in which the gallery was located to the Kennedy Center, if necessary. It would fit into its spacious and majestic setting.

Before we took leave of each other, Henry gave me his email address. That was better than getting a contract from him. A contract can always be changed or voided. But an email address, particularly from a top producer at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, is forever.
Chapter 8

First Season Jitters

When Gregg Henry made his promise to me that I could produce a program of prison-related plays and musicals at the next Kennedy Center Page-to-Stage Festival, I didn’t realize how busy a man he was. The three-day event took a lot of planning, juggling and financing. He seemed fully up to the task but what I didn’t know was that the festival took up only a part of Henry’s plate. He was responsible for other programs no less important. The Kennedy Center, while treating and paying its people well, likes to get a full measure of service from them. I guess an organization can do that when there’s no place that’s on the same level. To be part of the Kennedy Center team is to be in a royal family.

Here I was, a jester who had been invited to the palace to do his bit. An ex-con equipped with only a hope and a song. Okay, many songs. And more than a few friends, particularly if you count my enemies in prison, the principal one coincidentally being the most talented. He would eventually agree to be a headliner in the first season. Sometimes you have to put personal safety aside when your goal is a dynamic and riveting show. Isn’t that what Erik Weisz did when he had himself handcuffed, put in safes and then thrown into rivers as he performed his escapist feats under the name of Harry Houdini?

My first challenge was to get into that safe known as the Kennedy Center. While Gregg Henry had given me his promise, I couldn’t be sure that he would keep it. Suppose he turned out to be no more reliable or honorable than the players and producers to whom I had given my CDs at the festival? I would be waiting forever for him to get back to me.

I didn’t plan to wait indefinitely for his call. I had his email address and could get his telephone number from the Kennedy Center. If I didn’t hear from him in a reasonable amount of time, I’d contact him and remind him of his promise. Then I would request details of the stage and the time slot my Foundation would get at the next festival for the show I would produce. Surely he’d understand my anxiety and my need for specifics, then give them to me so I could plan the show.

I waited, but no word from Henry. More than 24 hours had passed since I met him. Could it be that he had more important things on his mind than me? Was it too soon to contact him? Not at all
when you’re in a marketing mode; no matter that a full year remained before the next festival. It’s best to keep the iron hot from the outset. With the fall and winter approaching, there would be time enough for it to cool down.

Follow-up happens to be one of my strong points. It makes sense. When you meet people you hope to do business with, you remind them of your interest and thank them. Even a hooker deserves a follow-up thank you card, call or email. You would be surprised how a small gesture like that can lead to appreciation over and beyond the call of duty.

That’s what I did with Henry. I sent him a glowing email the very next day. I told him how happy I was about his stroking my ego the way that he had, though I didn’t put it in nearly as bold terms. Nor did I ask him for any specifics about his promise to me. I merely said that my Foundation looked forward to being a part of the next festival and that I would await further details from him.

I had already composed in my head a second email to send him if he failed to contact me. Six months passed before I felt a need to send it.

Don’t think I sat around doing nothing during that time. I sat around playing my guitar, as well as doing other artistic things. Plus I performed and coordinated tasks for the Foundation. One event in particular occupied my time that fall.

I had conceived the idea for a *Taste of Justice Fair* a year earlier and now it was set to happen. The idea behind it was to have exhibits by various justice-related organizations. There would also be a stage to showcase entertainment with justice themes. No speeches, please. The entertainment would either be music that spoke to some aspect of justice, or would be by performers who had some involvement in the justice system. People like me. But beyond ex-prisoners, there would be talented individuals from the law enforcement community. After all, we all want to see a safer society. A good cop focuses on the crimes that really matter in a society, not the victimless variety. The latter is the domain of phony and exploitative politicians who want to make a name for themselves. Self-respecting police officers steer away from vice and sting operations that deal with drugs or sex. I once met a woman who divorced her cop husband when he volunteered for the “pussy posse” in his department. She didn’t want to go to bed with a man who solicited other women to go to bed with him, then arrest them for accepting his solicitation. In her opinion that was the height of sexism. She understood how such “work” could turn a guy on. But
she preferred that he use Viagra and leave harmless women trying to make a living alone.

At the Taste of Justice Fair, we also had victims of crime. A group that my Foundation has supported with money and artistic donations over the years, National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA), was represented. NOVA set up an impressive booth that distributed materials about the plight of crime victims. Information was provided about programs that were available to them. Even more impressive was the couple who stood behind the booth. They had experienced tremendous loss in their lives as a result of violent crime. They didn’t talk about what it was, nor did anyone ask. One look in their eyes told enough of their story. Whether a son was murdered or a daughter decimated, the couple had been through something terrible. When I performed my more somber classical guitar music, I had them in mind. I didn’t play Chopin’s famous “Funeral March” but instead played his haunting “Nocturne.”

A pianist I hired to play also had experience with violent crime. Similar to being a casualty of the Viet Nam war, he had been a victim of another unnecessary conflict: the War on Drugs. I’d seen plenty victims in jail, men with mangled bodies. Some shot by police, more often by fellow insurgents who pushed for more resources, more loyalty and more territory, and to hell with anyone who got in their way. All is fair in war supposedly, which is why such a state of conflict needs to be abolished. You can’t force communists to become capitalists, or stimulant users to become water drinkers. Even W.C. Fields, a criminal alcohol user during Prohibition, couldn’t be reformed. “Fish copulate in water,” he said, mocking a suggestion that he make the switch.

The piano playing victim was someone who even the most entrenched vice cops could sympathize with. In fact, he was working with them in furtherance of their war. This man had been a neighborhood block captain. His block was on the fringe of a drug market. Whenever he saw drug activity, he reported it to the police. Whoever he saw engaging in buying or selling, he identified for the police. Then one day he couldn’t see anymore. He had been attacked with acid that would render him blind and horribly disfigured for the rest of his life.

He took his solace in music, becoming a good piano player, composing his own songs. I met him through a mutual friend, a professor at Catholic University. He had enrolled in her writing class. It would help him come up with quality lyrics for the songs he wrote. I listened to his music, and was impressed. I contracted him to perform at the Taste of Justice Fair.
Unfortunately, my sensitivity to his condition exceeded my understanding of it. He said he would bring his portable electric piano to the event. But I encouraged him not to. “There will be a piano there, a good one,” I assured him. In fact I had made arrangements to have a first-class baby grand on the stage. If that didn’t please him I didn’t know what would. Instead of playing on a $300 instrument, he would perform on a $50,000 one.

His playing was a disaster, and I take full responsibility. He had failed to realize, and I did not have the foresight to see, that the stiffness of an acoustic piano keyboard would pose an insurmountable obstacle for him. The acid dumped on him had damaged more than his face. It covered his shoulders and arms, destroying muscles that worked his hands and fingers. Playing an electronic keyboard with its light touch was doable. But not the instrument I provided. Still he did his best, painfully producing a soft sound that few could hear. At the conclusion of his set, he apologized. Tempted to give him a bonus for his heroic effort, I put myself in his position and I didn’t. If you are not an artist, you won’t understand that. But believe me, it would have only added insult to grave injury.

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Thanks to the disappearance of Robocop, his electronic device and his condescending attitude, the winter was shaping up to be a fun time, particularly for the holiday season. There’s no time of year I enjoy more, in or out of jail. The spirit of giving, loving, and singing seems to infect and inspire everyone. The songs are especially wonderful, whether written for Christmas or Hanukkah. I have a large repertoire of both for solo guitar. Sometimes I perform with a violinist or a flutist I know. It’s a break for me to play with someone else. I put this in the same category as a party during the festive season. I always include music from my Christmas in Prison CD, selling many of them in the process.

I was careful not to spread the good news about the Kennedy Center opportunity beyond my closest friends and associates. They knew about my unbridled optimism, so if it never materialized, they wouldn’t be surprised. “What other dreams do you have Dennis?” they might ask good-naturedly if that negative outcome occurred. Probably adding, “I’m sure you’ll pick yourself up and pursue an equally rewarding goal.”

During the six months that passed after my meeting with Gregg Henry, I never ventured far away from my phone in the event that he called. Of course having a cell phone as my only phone, I
never stray far from it anyway. I always hoped the next call would come from him, and the sooner it came the better. I knew I needed time to get everything organized and to secure the material and the talent that would be needed for the show. This wouldn’t be an easy task since I was dealing with playwrights and composers who were either in prison or recently released and who were, more often than not, leading transitional existences. I had to get word out and then evaluate their submissions. I was charting a course through unexplored waters. All I knew was that I had to be ready, and whatever I used had to be good. Gregg Henry wouldn’t give me a second chance to make a good first impression at the Kennedy Center. Like opening night of a Broadway show with critics present, I had to prove myself right out the gate.

But I couldn’t take my first step until I got the go-ahead. If the project fell through after prison artists got their hopes up, I’d never live it down. I wouldn’t blame them for being angry at me. When you go to prison, you are always looking for a ray of sunshine in a cloudy and often stormy sky. Communications full of bad news are common. Letters telling of the death of a loved one that a prisoner will not have a chance to see or hold again are some of the hardest to endure. Telephone calls made by prisoners that reveal changed numbers or hang-ups let inmates know in no uncertain terms that they are no longer wanted. Divorce papers, court decisions telling of appeal denials, stay away orders by adult children that the prisoner may have helped put though college or law school are everyday occurrences.

I once got a letter in prison from a woman I had loved long ago. Her letter came near the end of my 10-year sentence and seemed to be a gift from heaven. With my mother on her death bed and my son and sister too busy to see me or answer my letters—too busy in their preparations to steal my inheritance and savings—this woman from my past was a blessing. We exchanged letters and were soon back to declaring our undying devotion for each other. Then she popped the question. Could she visit me? I hesitated. As the saying goes, he who hesitates is lost. Of course I wanted her to visit, I wanted to see her. Visits in prison, unlike ones in jail, do not take place with a glass partition separating the parties. People can touch each other, hold hands, exchange kisses. Inmate friends of mine claim to have done much more, either with hands under the table or through using available bathrooms. It had been almost 10 years since I had sensually touched a woman, or anyone for that matter. So desperate was I that I looked forward to being patted down by female officers
when they did their random searches. Their perfume was more than intoxicating. It was a powerful aphrodisiac.

I hesitated about the request for a visit because the prospect of being disappointed weighed heavily on me. Suppose she agreed to come but didn’t. Or came and didn’t return. As Smokey Robinson belted out in his song “I Second That Emotion,” a “taste of love is worse than none at all.” My sister had come to see me during my first year of imprisonment and, despite her promises, never returned. A favorite uncle gave me his solemn, unsolicited oath that he’d come, but never did. My son was the least disappointing in the lot. He came more often than anyone, once bringing his entire family. But then he abruptly stopped. He said that my location in Florida made it burdensome for him to visit since he lived in Washington. I didn’t question him; in fact I admired him for putting his family before me. In his subsequent letters, he assured me that my grandchildren loved me dearly and, he said with absolute certainty, once I got moved to a prison closer to Washington he’d come visit. He didn’t. I was in Petersburg FCI for the last four years of my sentence, which is the closest prison to Washington in nearby Virginia. Yet not only did he fail to visit, he stopped writing.

In fact, no one came while I was in Petersburg. But I had gotten used to it and was able to get over it. Eventually I stopped envying the men who pressed their uniforms and showered themselves in preparation for visits. When they did that I took off for the rec yard or chapel where a guitar was waiting for me. Those were good times to write and play introspective music. As renowned guitarist David Bromberg once said, “You’ve got to suffer if you want to play the blues.”

The woman who had re-entered my life chased the blues away. But I feared they would return with a vengeance if she did what others had done. So I hesitated, offering one reason after another to put off her plans to visit: I had to submit paperwork to get her approved, clear my schedule, get a better uniform. Finally, she gave up asking. Soon, she gave up on me entirely. She found someone else to visit, a man on the outside she could see whenever she wished.

This was sad for me. But at least the pain was more manageable than it would have been had we gotten closer and she then disappeared while I was in prison, never knowing why or where she had gone.

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I didn’t want to get word out prematurely to men and women in prison about the Kennedy Center opportunity for fear that I’d disappoint them the way others had disappointed me. Better to wait until I got definite approval and a specific date from Gregg Henry.

With six months remaining before the festival, I knew that I had to act. Another email to him, then a call. No response. More on a weekly basis. Finally, I got through. Even though I didn’t ask him for an explanation for his delay in contacting me, he offered me one; a good sign. He told me how busy he was. Then more pleasant words. Was my Foundation still interested in being a part of the festival. He knew we could contribute a lot, he said. Henry seemed surer of this than I. After all, time was running short and so much had to be done. He asked me to complete some forms and to read the rules for the festival to which I would also have to agree. From my point of view, all I needed to know was where to sign. If this meant giving up one of my lungs, I would do it gladly. Anything but one of my fingers since they’re necessary for playing the guitar.

From then on, everything moved quickly. I was now part of the team and so was kept in the loop. I got notices and deadlines regularly. For example, when the Kennedy Center needed press information about the Foundation and its plans for the festival, I complied right away in accordance with the deadline given me. If my group was going to stand out among other participating organizations, it would be for excellence, not tardiness.

I took no chances in angering the benevolent giant. Yet, that is what I ended up doing, and on more than one occasion. The roar of that anger—justified I must admit—still rings in my ears. That first season for me at the Kennedy Center was a learning experience.

My first step was to put together a show. My second was to pay for it. My third and perhaps biggest challenge was to pull it off in such a way that the audience wouldn’t walk out but rather stand up and applaud. Only then would I be assured of continued participation in the annual Page-to-Stage Festival.

I put together a flyer calling for submissions by prisoners and ex-prisoners of plays and musical works they had written. A design company called Waters Edge Graphics helped me create it, contributing their superb services to the project. The company is headed by an ex-inmate artist whose works are on display at the Prison Art Gallery. He is a success story par excellence. When he was released from prison, he took one of the officers, a woman, with him. It wasn’t a kidnapping, but an elopement. They lived happily ever after in a home they bought jointly after he established himself as an artist. The flyer he created for us was perfect to mail to jails and
prisons across the country. It had a design and wording to grab the attention of creative inmates everywhere.

Email notices were also sent to the more than 4,000 supporters of the Foundation. The bulk of this list consists of ex-prisoners and members of their families as well as the loved ones of those still in prison. There is nothing like electronic communication if you want to get word out quickly. We encouraged everyone who received the email to pass it along. It wasn’t everyday that society’s throwaways were given a chance to demonstrate their creative skills at such a prestigious institution as the Kennedy Center. In the email message I included my personal telephone number, with an invitation to call me any day at any time. When I commit myself to doing something, I do it completely.

The only distraction I had was my son. He wanted to see me. I wish I could call this a pleasant distraction, but it was far from it, given the circumstances under which the meeting would take place. He had his legal colleague contact me to once again demand that I appear in court. The same associate in the DC Attorney General’s Office who had prosecuted me and sent me to jail twice for speaking to my son’s lawyers who had deceptively made themselves available to talk to me and in one case initiating the conversation. I had hoped that another court appearance would not be necessary, that by now we had put our differences behind us. Aside from the lawsuit against him and my sister for the stolen money, I bore no ill feelings toward him. Even the time in jail was not a sore point. If I hadn’t gone to jail, I would not have gotten the funding for the Foundation that resulted from the grant proposal I wrote there. Or gotten my foot in the door of the Kennedy Center.

Nonetheless, he wanted me back in court. He and his colleague intended to convince a new judge that the stay away order they had once gotten against me should be continued for another year. In Washington, DC, such orders automatically expire at the end of a year. But renewals are common, even when they are not fully justified. Judges like to give complaining parties the benefit of the doubt. In my son’s case, as an Assistant Attorney General who was represented by a high level lawyer in his powerful agency, a judge would pay close attention to such a request.

It had not been until the beginning of 2007, a few months before this latest demand for a hearing, that I learned about my son’s influential position in the government. To be honest, I never had much of an interest in trying to find out where he worked. But one day, I got a call from Fritz Mulhauser, an ACLU staff attorney who once represented the Foundation. He told me that he had seen a
document with my son’s name and title on it that showed he was an Assistant Attorney General assigned to City Hall in the legal counsel division. Very impressive, I thought. My son helped the mayor and city council members draft legislation and prepare legal opinions to guide them. I knew about these duties because I had dealt with his division during my more than 30 years of political activism in the city. It was also described on his agency’s website.

Suddenly, the pieces started to fit together. This is how he was able to get the head of the powerful domestic violence branch of his agency to represent him, and how the two of them succeeded in roping a normally reasonable judge into their corner.

Fritz wished me good luck at the next hearing when I would again have to face the terrible twosome. Luck, I now knew, would not do the job. I needed a miracle.

Showing up with my lawyer, I was glad to see that the judge who sent me to jail twice based on the recommendation of the incestuous duo was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps in his haste to punish, he had sent himself to jail.

I learned that he had “rotated” to another section of the courthouse. Maybe he was assigned to the janitorial department where the damage he could cause was minimal. In his place was the Honorable Judge Linda Turner. She was not unknown to me. I knew her to be a fair-minded jurist who kept a level head. It came from both her high level of intelligence and her family genes. I interacted with her brother, Maurice Turner. Like me, Maurice had run for office in Washington, though his background was very different from mine. He had been the Chief of Police when Marion Barry was mayor. It must have been difficult for him to arrest and imprison thousands of drug users when rumors were flying that his boss, the mayor of the city, was a drug user himself. Those rumors were of course eventually confirmed when the FBI arrested Barry. The local police couldn’t do it since Maurice would then be out of a job.

I didn’t find fault with Maurice for not moving on the mayor. I just wished he would leave the other harmless drug users alone as well. The same thing for the sex workers and their clients whom his vice division, then called the “Morals Division,” solicited and locked up. I communicated with him about these things. He knew about me from reading in the newspapers about my activism. One day, while still on his job, he surprised everyone, including me, by coming around to the idea of decriminalizing prostitution. He didn’t last long after that. Without a job he eventually ran for mayor himself, but he didn’t come close to winning. Maurice as an honest man who told the
voters the truth, not the lies they had been conditioned to hear, seemed an oddball to them.

Judge Linda Turner, his younger sister, seemed to be cut from the same courageous cloth. Perhaps I had finally found a sympathetic ear; someone who would see the legal patricide my son and his colleagues were perpetrating against me, just as perceptive Judge Liebowitz had detected.

My attorney told me before the start of the hearing, “You don’t stand much of a chance. While this is a civil hearing and not a criminal proceeding, even Judge Turner won’t deny your son’s request when she finds out that you have been to jail twice at your son’s request. Maybe if nothing happens over the next year, you can get rid of the order.” I told her that the stay away order prevented me from going to my son’s place of employment, which was City Hall. “My Foundation has business there; it’s important for me to go there from time to time,” I said.

Following more discussion, my lawyer went to speak to my son’s lawyer. Then came the surprise of the day: my son wanted to speak to me directly. The four of us—my son, his lawyer/colleague, my lawyer and I—went into the court hallway. I stuck out my hand to shake my son’s; he weakly reciprocated. I then shook the hand of his attorney who responded with only slightly more firmness. Those handshakes told me a lot about the purpose of this unusual hallway meeting. They were afraid. They knew that, like two illicit lovers caught in the act, their cover had been blown. Maybe they were in fact lovers. My son’s wife had changed dramatically since their marriage ceremony, a church wedding I had attended and helped finance just before entering prison in 1992. When I saw her some 10 years later upon my release, she was virtually unrecognizable in her obesity. Perhaps my son had moved on to greener, blonder, slimmer pastures? What else could explain his colleague’s devotion to him, driving her to violate her ethical principles and risk her job by defending him. As my son’s superior, heading a major branch of the DC Attorney General’s Office, she could have easily assigned a junior attorney to handle this minor matter. Then again, another attorney might have blown the whistle on my son’s misuse of his position by allowing himself to be represented by an attorney from his agency in this purely personal matter. Imagine the scandal that would result if the mayor got a city attorney to try to keep his father away from him.

Standing in the corridor as he uncomfortably faced me, my son first spoke. “Can you agree to have the judge renew the stay away order without us having to go through this hearing?” The
audacity of his question made me shudder. He wanted me to tell the judge that I was a dangerous man and a threat to him, knowing as all four of us did that this was nonsense. I told him in a patient way that I could not do that. Then I said, “You work in City Hall where I sometimes have to go to hearings and meetings. I don’t want the stay away order hanging over my head that could interfere with my doing that.” His attorney laughed: “City Hall is a public building so of course you have a right to go there. A stay away order doesn’t apply to a public building as long as you keep away from your son’s office there.” I nodded slightly since that was also my understanding. Still I knew I had to take this matter up with Judge Turner at the hearing. I turned to my son and said, “Whatever you and my sister have done with the money, we can get over it and move on and...” He threw his hands in the air agitatedly to cut me off. “Dad, I don’t want to talk about it!” Turning his back on me, he walked away with his lawyer/colleague/friend trailing close behind.

We went into the courtroom for the hearing. I whispered to my lawyer, “Make sure you raise the fact that I need to have access to meetings at City Hall. I want the judge to know about it so there’ll be no question.” My lawyer said that it wasn’t necessary after what my son’s attorney had said in the hallway, “which is only logical since we’re talking about City Hall, the most public building in DC.” But I insisted that the judge be informed. After all, my son’s lawyers were not known for their truthfulness or sense of fair play.

Judge Turner, in a barely audible voice, reluctantly renewed the stay away order for another year. My attorney then brought up my need to enter City Hall on occasion, and I heard Judge Turner, now almost in a whisper, agree that it was allowable. I could almost see her shaking her head about what my son was doing. Finally, I had gotten a ruling partially in my favor, one that guaranteed my right as a citizen to remain active in the political arena. Or so I thought.

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The magic name of the Kennedy Center was attracting a lot of people to my circle of friends and supporters. It was a circle that seemed to be increasing by the hour. Word was spreading; the call for men and women with creative ideas and involvement in prisons, both past and present, was being answered in a big way. A day didn’t go by when I didn’t get a call, letter or email from someone who had a play or song that could fit in the program, or knew someone who did. I felt like I was at a banquet, with tables laden with food of every kind. Most of it delectable, though there were also peanut butter and
bologna sandwiches. If you don’t know already, such sandwiches form the staple of jail cuisine. So I don’t overlook them. After all, I have had more than my share of such fare. They aren’t to be tossed when you’re hungry. But I was hungry for the best, most varied show possible for our Kennedy Center debut.

One caller, an ex-prisoner from Oregon, wanted to know about funding to get to DC to perform in the show. He had a music group that had started in prison and continued to perform on the outside. He had put together a few skits based on their experiences. I was impressed, but could not guarantee him funding, only a reasonable fee for each of the members. I suggested that the troupe do their own fundraising. Surely there were businesses and supporters in their region who would want to sponsor their appearance at the Kennedy Center. He said that he would do his best, but I didn’t hear from him again. He didn’t even send me the sample of their songs that I had requested.

That happened a few times. A musical group from California that was headed by an ex-prisoner contacted me. They were on their way up the ladder of recognition and prosperity. He recognized that the “Kennedy Center gig” could catapult them in that direction and quickly. But he was hesitant; I asked him why. His roundabout answer revealed that being associated with a prison-related program could do them more harm than good. Sometimes, it was better to let sleeping dogs, or forgotten ones, lie. His past was something that he had to live down every day. “But,” I told him, “the idea of the show is to demonstrate our humanity and showcase our talents to the world. If we ourselves won’t fight the battle to overcome discrimination, who will?” My words were unconvincing. Everyone wants to benefit from the fruits of a fight for freedom, but few want to be on the front lines where they might become a casualty. I ran into this many times.

A playwright from the Midwest had been out of prison for two years and was still on probation. He was reluctant too. “I don’t know if I can get permission from my probation officer.” Then why did he call me, I wondered. He said he was curious. “Is this really at the Kennedy Center, the Kennedy Center that everybody talks about?” I assured him it was. He was impressed to the point of fear, never calling me again. I don’t know what it is about people who strive to be famous, yet are scared to death of it happening. That’s why so many people don’t give their best. And why, in cases where fame is achieved, they can’t handle it. After Woodstock brought sudden stardom to Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, they both self-
destruction. She drank herself to death at the age of 27; he drugged himself to oblivion at the same age.

It was just as well that I was finding people with cold feet. The majority of those who contacted me were hot for the idea, from head to toe. I’d have more talent and material than I needed.

There was a small setback but it didn’t dampen anyone’s enthusiasm. That’s because I didn’t tell anyone. The impression that most people had when they read my “Request for Plays and Performers” was that we were getting a major stage at the Kennedy Center. I knew that we would be lucky to get even a minor one since we were the new kids on this very popular block. It didn’t matter to me. As long as we didn’t end up in the parking lot, we’d still be part of this spectacular festival in a magnificent building that the world admires.

Finally, word came from the Kennedy Center that we would have a partitioned space on the top floor, a level reserved for minor theatrical activities. I went to see it immediately, going alone so that there would be no witnesses. It was in fact a room that might be suitable for a wedding reception. A small one. No stage graced the space, not even risers. I’d have to hire tall performers, I figured.

Gregg Henry and his staff were no dopes. We were untested and they were not about to take much of a chance with us. First they would watch us walk. If we didn’t bruise ourselves or, more importantly, the Kennedy Center’s reputation, we would be allowed to run. That was why this first year was so important for me. We had to demonstrate we could navigate correctly even with little time and a small space. That we could stage a quality show even without a stage.

It could have been worse, much worse. When I attended the Page-to-Stage Festival the year before, I saw the tiniest, least accessible spaces in the building utilized. That’s how popular the festival is among both theater goers and production groups. One show I saw was in a miniscule rehearsal studio that occupied a hidden section of the building with a costume room adjoining it. Some of the Kennedy Center personnel on duty for the festival couldn’t tell me how to get there; only an older and more experienced usher knew. When I arrived to perch myself in one obscure performance location, I felt like the Phantom of the Opera.

The space designated for us was in the mid-range of desirability. Where we got lucky was in the time slot given us: two and a half hours on a Saturday night at the Kennedy Center!

I was determined not to disappoint. I set my goal on getting the money to do it, the people to do it, and the audience to do what
theater goers have always done to assure the success of a show: stand up and cheer. Little did I realize but many people who came would have no choice but to stand up since we would run out of chairs in the space given us. I told you I was a good marketer.

Money was important even though we were getting free space at the Kennedy Center. I wanted to pay everyone who participated, whether they performed or only provided material that was performed by others. This was important to me because I knew first-hand how prisoners are exploited for their labor on the inside, and how they are often underpaid on the outside after release. The attitude of those who hire them seems to be one of “we are doing you a favor by taking you on, so don’t complain about the pay.” I don’t doubt that I could have attracted talent to the Kennedy Center without paying them. But that would have put me in a class of those I resented. Besides, I wanted to make sure that the performers I hired would show up and that the writing and music I commissioned got completed on time. Money can be a strong motivator, particularly for people who desperately need it.

To obtain the funds I sought, I created a budget and went to grant making organizations. But I found a cold reception there. What we were doing was too unconventional. Some of them were accustomed to helping people in need but not necessarily empowering them as our Kennedy Center program would do. At the end of the show, we would not be seeking hand-outs, but rather hand claps. I knew that clapping lasts a lot longer than the cash that performers and playwrights take with them. Memory trumps money any day.

I also went to grant making agencies with a reputation for being non- elitist, non-condescending. But they needed time to review applications, evaluate proposals and perform other bureaucratic tasks. Time we didn’t have. I imagine that we could have appeased them by dividing our work between satisfying their requirements and preparing for the show. But then the show would have suffered, disappointing the mortals who attended and upsetting the gods of the Kennedy Center. I didn’t want to take the risk with either.

An extraordinary thing happened when I asked small to medium non-profit justice organizations to help cover our expenses. They responded enthusiastically and quickly. The response was so immediate that the effort didn’t divert me from the show. I know I could have gathered more money if I had spent more time at it, but I only wanted what was needed. I approached only a few groups for large amounts, rather than many for small sums. I could have put on my marketing hat and written a fund-raising letter touting our upcoming Kennedy Center show. With the right mailing list, which
can easily be acquired through a list rental agency, it could have generated a lot of income. But I was more interested in generating good will than money. My strategy might be different in future years if expenses increased. But for now, I was happy that everything was covered.

Some of the stand-out groups that stepped up to the plate with only a phone call from me were the ACLU of the Northern Capital Region, Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM), Drug Policy Alliance, The Sentencing Project, Justice Policy Institute, Criminal Justice Institute, Welcome Home Program, two area churches with strong prison ministries—Grace Episcopal of Georgetown and First Trinity Lutheran of Judiciary Square—and two ex-prisoners who established successful businesses in the Washington region. Another ex-prisoner, Lloyd Rubin, a previously discussed steadfast supporter of the Foundation, offered to help, even to underwrite the entire cost with his customary generosity. But he had done so much already that year to support our newsletter publishing program and the Prison Art Gallery that I wanted to spread the cost of the Kennedy Center show to others. I promised Lloyd that in an emergency I would call on him; that he should stay near his phone and his checkbook. It would be a year before I dialed his number with a request. But even before that emergency happened, Lloyd was happy to pitch in with other projects.

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Emergencies are not always the kind that finances can fix. Sometimes finesse is required. Fortunately, I have some of it inherited from my mother and father, who were recognized by many as charmers. I don’t claim to have an equal amount, but sometimes enough to get by.

I mustered all I could find on the day that Gregg Henry’s associate called me, very upset. Apparently one of the flyers my Foundation had created to promote the Kennedy Center show in Washington neighborhoods, including Capitol Hill, had found its way onto her desk. She was flabbergasted when she saw it. Didn’t I know that the Kennedy Center had a certain image to uphold? Why would I distribute a flyer that stood to hurt that image? I asked her to describe the flyer that upset her so much. After all, the Foundation was composed of more than one person, I said. Sometimes one of us does something without the knowledge or approval of others. Whatever
her concern, I was sure that I could straighten it out to her satisfaction.

Sometimes finessing means lying, as I was doing here. But it gave me a chance to think, to come up with more ways to finesse the situation. I knew that I would not confess to being the creator of the flyer in question, though before her call I was proud take credit for it as a good example of my best creative efforts. When she finished describing it in shocked terms, I inhaled audibly in sympathy with her. Then I said truthfully, “I know who created the flyer. I should have stopped it from going out.” The flyer in question carried the bold headline, “Convicts at the Kennedy Center.” I told her that we would be more careful in the future, that we would tone down our promotions considerably. Anything to appease them. After all, this was our honeymoon at the Kennedy Center. It made no sense to do anything to rock the bed. If they insisted on safe sex, fine. Just don’t kick us off the mattress and onto the floor.

That had apparently not been her intention. In fact, she ended the conversation with a compliment. “We think the flyer is innovative; it struck us as being a form of guerilla marketing, which could be effective. But whenever the name of the Kennedy Center is used, we have to be cautious.” I agreed to clear all marketing efforts in the future through her, and she was satisfied. It might be protected sex, but it still beat celibacy.

One other crisis that created conflict with Kennedy Center staff occurred the night of the show. I could hardly blame anyone else for it since I was on the scene and clearly responsible. I got to our performance space early with my helpers, making preparations that I thought were reasonable. But the Page-to-Stage staff didn’t think so and threatened to pull the plug on us. So I changed course and immediately complied. I pulled the plug myself.

We’re talking about two different kinds of plugs here. In their case I am using the word plug metaphorically, while in my case it was an actual plug connected to a sound system. They didn’t want us to use a sound system, and they weren’t going to provide one themselves. They had given me this news months before, but at the time I did not think they were serious. It wasn’t a huge space we were getting for our show, but it wasn’t tiny either. I couldn’t see how some of our softer speaking and singing performers would be heard in the back without at least minor amplification. Just a small system would do the trick. Why would they mind? I didn’t think that they would even notice. I had an expert sound engineer do it, Don Zientara of Inner Ear Studios in Virginia. He worked quickly and
professionally, using a few small speakers that he strategically placed around the room.

They noticed and objected. It was more than bureaucracy at work. It was a practical concern. We were in a large area of the Kennedy Center, they said. that utilized accordion room dividers to create separate performance spaces, of which ours was one. Because the temporary walls were thin, amplified sound in one room could carry over to another. So no amplification of any type was allowed, not even a bull horn.

To stay plugged into the festival, hopefully forever, I directed Don to unplug the system he had brought and had so expertly configured. The incident had a surprise happy ending. At the conclusion of our show, I was complimented by the Page-to-Stage coordinators for adding something positive and popular to their festival. I took the opportunity to do follow-up finessing. “I’m sorry about the misunderstanding regarding the sound system we brought in. We had gotten someone responsible to do it, a sound engineer named Don Zientara and ….” I was suddenly interrupted by one of the staffers. “Don Zientara? He was here helping you set up?” I said yes. They marveled at my connection to this legendary, highly-praised and much sought-after professional whom music stars have credited with helping them produce award-winning CDs. I related the story to Don the next day; told him that he hadn’t showed up in vain, that his very presence had helped raise our standing and would be an aid in their decision about whether we would continue to be a part of the festival in the future. We had put on a good show. But it was not without glitches. In fact Gregg Henry told me later that if he knew beforehand what we were going to do he would not have allowed it.

I had sought variety. But in the end I seemed to have gotten a hodgepodge. But an interesting and entertaining one. The audience, which thankfully was far greater than the capacity of the room, showed their appreciation. They might have reacted even more positively if they had known what I had gone through to put it together, though their applause could not have been louder.

The name I chose for the show, “From Prison to the Stage,” was suggested by one of the playwrights and performers who signed on early, Lamont Carey. Lamont had spent many years in prison and was now stuck with a parole officer who seemed to be a twin of Robocop. The officer thought that his parolee deserved to go back, just as Robocop thought I did. Why? Because Lamont was making money in an unconventional way by writing and performing anywhere that would have him, from stand up “spoken word” venues to dramatic TV shows. In between he served as a recruiter for directors
and producers when they needed extras and bit players. He himself once played a cop. Anything to keep the landlord and parole officer from his door. At the Kennedy Center show, Lamont did a one-man play that featured scenes from his days in prison. He presented, for example, a dramatic skit involving a cellmate who had committed suicide as his time for release neared. The man realized that he had no one on the outside who cared about him any longer. That could have been my fate had I not found solace in music.

Another playwright/performer in the program, Joseph Briggs aka One Wise African, offered something similar. Why did I sign him up as well? Because I still couldn’t be sure who would show up for the show, even with money waiting for them. It wasn’t that I thought them unreliable. But as an ex-prisoner myself I knew that a trap door could be sprung on them at any time. It comes with the territory. An ex-con, even if not on parole or probation, is susceptible to being sent back to prison with little notice and only the barest hint of a trial or hearing. When people know you’ve been to prison once, they believe you are vulnerable and can be taken advantage of. If you don’t do what they say, they can concoct allegations against you. When the police are summoned, you will be arrested because it will be your word against the statement of a self-proclaimed victim. And because you are an ex-convict, you will sit in jail until your trial, where you will probably plead guilty upon the advice of your lawyer. He or she will say, “We both know you’re innocent, but a jury will only look at your criminal record and convict you.”

Another person I signed for “From Prison to the Stage” was already in jail. I got a call one day from a jail chaplain who heard about our upcoming show. “I’ve got an inmate sitting in my office here at the jail that I think would be great for your show.” I was puzzled. How can we get him to the Kennedy Center? Engineer a jail break?

The chaplain was a step ahead of me. “He’s going to be released two days before your show. He lives in Washington DC, so he’ll be nearby.” It sounded more promising by the minute. The prisoner, Anthony Newlon, would be home in time yet probably not out long enough to be re-arrested. Probably. “He’s sitting there with you?” I asked. She confirmed he was and that they were both on speaker phone. I asked Anthony to sing one of his songs. He did and I was impressed. I saw only one obstacle. There could be no rehearsal with him, and he needed an accompanist on piano or guitar. I wasn’t scheduling any rehearsals that close to the show. I may be an optimist, but I am not insane. The chaplain saved the day. “I can accompany him. We can rehearse here at the jail and then I can come
to the Kennedy Center to play for him. I’m not bad on piano and the both of us have already performed for the residents here.”

Hearing this offer was music to my ears. Not only was it a terrific idea, but a unique one. A duo consisting of a jail staffer and a jail inmate. What a publicity coup! It seemed too good to be true. Alas, it turned out to be too good to be true. A few weeks before the show, I got a call from the chaplain. The warden had heard about her plans and told her to cancel them. It looked like “fraternizing” with an inmate. Never mind that the inmate would be out of prison when they publicly performed together at the Kennedy Center.

I was shocked. The jail was passing up ideal opportunity to show its commitment to helping prisoners get on their own feet when they returned to society. Of lending a helping hand or, in this case, two hands at the piano. At the Kennedy Center, no less. The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. World leaders go there; celebrities; Presidents of the United States of America. Why did it happen. Was the warden demonstrating sour grapes that he wasn’t asked to perform? Maybe it was protocol. Before a staff member could make a debut at the Kennedy Center, did the warden have to perform first? But what could he do? A comedy act? That’s what his cancellation of the chaplain’s participation seemed to suggest.

In true show business fashion, I demanded that the act go on anyway, even without the piano accompaniment. I spoke to Anthony and told him that I wanted him to sing as best he could, even if only a single song. Just his own voice, like the singer who belts out the “Star Spangled Banner” at a sports event. Surely he could do that. At first he was reluctant. He said that he had rehearsed a lot with the chaplain to get the act right. To do it alone would be difficult, not to mention intimidating. I pushed back as hard as I could. “You are in the program already. You represent all prisoners in your jail; you have to show the world you can make it on your own. You don’t really need a jail staffer here on the outside to help you survive. Forget about the set you rehearsed. Just do one song and I’ll be happy. A two-minute song. What I promised to pay you and the chaplain will all go to you. All for just one short song. Even high-priced lawyers don’t get paid that much for 120 seconds of their time.”

He agreed to do it. But I wanted more than an agreement. I wanted a firm commitment, an absolute guarantee. He gave it to me. “I promise, and when I make a promise, whether to do something good or bad, I always keep it.” That was enough for me. I told him how to get to the Kennedy Center even if he had no money for transportation. He already knew how to do it. Bus drivers in Washington are instructed to let passengers ride for free if they show
the blue wristband with photo and inmate ID number which jail prisoners wear. It doesn’t mean that crime pays, only that the city transportation system has more compassion for returning prisoners than certain wardens or family members. True to his word, the man showed up on time and in good singing voice. He left with money in his pocket and his reputation for being truthful unblemished.

Two other ex-prisoner performers on the bill posed problems. One showed up late, the other not at all. But their roles were minor so I was able to cover for them. In fact, having known these individuals for awhile I wasn’t surprised. I had booked them for their talent and because I like to give ex-prisoners the benefit of the doubt. Just as Gregg Henry had given me.

I thought that they would show up when they were supposed to. After all, one was an old friend and the other a long-time enemy going back to our days in prison together.

Let’s start with the friend. Like me, he played guitar and wrote original songs. We had become pals shortly after I left prison when I started the Foundation. He wrote to ask me for help in providing instructional materials and contacts so that he could get a head start when he got out of prison. I took a personal interest in him because of his creative work. The lyrics of songs he sent were good. He was using acoustic guitar techniques pioneered by white players, employing them to convey the black experience in America. The approach had the potential to reach a large audience, just like the music of superstar Tracy Chapman has broad appeal.

He got out of prison a year before the Kennedy Center show. That was before I knew that there was going to be a show. But I did know of other opportunities for him to perform his music and earn good money. At first enthusiastic and reliable, he soon proved to be tardy and eventually a no-show. I kept him as a friend but no longer helped him with bookings. That was for his benefit as well as mine. His professional act was good, but he needed to get his personal act together. Otherwise, he would hurt both our reputations. When I was planning the Kennedy Center show, however, I decided to give him another try. Frankly, I needed him to round out the program with his style. He had a good story to tell about his background and he related it well between his original songs. The story was good but now I don’t think it was true, at least not completely. He said that he had been in prison twice before, which I had no trouble believing. The story broke down when he said that he had gone to the West Coast after his second release and made a big splash there. He said he was doing well, making a name for himself, and getting high earnings. No way, I thought. Not for a person so unreliable. But I believed the last
part of his story that an old drug habit kicked in to end his freedom. I surmised that drugs were responsible for his present erratic behavior. In asking him to do his material at the Kennedy Center, I was aware of the risk. But the spot I assigned him wasn’t big and could be filled by another artist if he didn’t come. On the other hand, the prestige of a good-paying appearance at the Kennedy Center might be the impetus he needed to get himself in shape.

I didn’t see him around when his spot arrived, so I passed him up. No problem, like skipping a minor item in a lavish 10-course dinner. Toward the end of the show, however, he appeared. There was still time to accommodate him with a little juggling, and that’s what I did. Surprises in show business can add to the excitement, though they tend to shorten the life expectancy of producers. Not me. I am the tougher kind. Ten years in prison will give you a very thick hide. I paid him as agreed and said that I would be in touch. I called him about a month later to offer two new opportunities: one at the Prison Art Gallery and the other at a local law school where prison-made art from our gallery was being displayed. Unable to get through to him, I left a message. Finally I received a timid email. It came from his email account but not from him. A friend was answering messages for him. He said that my Kennedy Center star was back in jail.

My hiring of the other ex-prisoner musician for the program was an even more daring decision. After years of not seeing this man, I encountered him while crossing K Street in downtown Washington, DC. If you had asked me who I least expected, or wanted, to see among the people I knew in prison, I would have named him. He was more than anti-social but downright psychotic. I imagined a string of victims in his past, some living and some not. He surely saw me in prison as a future casualty at his hands. He told me so. And I could understand why if not entirely agree with his reasoning.

In prison at FCI Petersburg together, we were rival producers of inmate shows. During my last months in prison he got the jump on me by booking the chow hall for a Christmas show before I could do it. And he planned to leave me and my cast out of it.

Even before this happened I was in a bad mood. My dishonest lawyer son had just sent me his first communication in years, which was not pleasant. Instead of explaining the whereabouts of my inheritance and savings, he ordered me to stay away from him. This after he exerted his influence to cancel my scheduled transfer to a halfway house, something that would have gotten me out of prison sooner. Now the chow hall show would be done by another prisoner who planned to spitefully leave me out.
I reacted to this by lobbying to get his show cancelled. In this I succeeded on the basis that there were Jewish and Muslim inmates eating in the chow hall who didn’t celebrate Christmas. The show belonged in the chapel, I said. And that’s what happened, much to the consternation of my adversary. He knew that not as many people would see the show there. I had demonstrated my power by pushing him from playing the big room to a smaller one. Suffice it to say he was red-hot angry. I had to inform an officer of my fear. My last wish was to leave in a few weeks in an ambulance or a hearse. The officer calmed him down. I even attended the chapel show to make amends. After a superb performance he still showed anger. As I packed to leave the prison, he wouldn’t speak to me.

Now we were together in the middle of K Street. He spoke first. “Look, what happened between us is in the past. It’s finished. This is the here and now, so let’s just forget about it.” I didn’t know whether he was being sincere, but I didn’t care. All I thought was that his show in the prison chapel had been very good, his performance in particular. I had to have him for the Kennedy Center. He’d be my only piano playing ex-con. The man’s talent was exceptional, a cross between Ray Charles and Nat King Cole. Plus he had a Latino name, though he didn’t speak a word of Spanish. “You still play the piano?” I asked “Sure,” he answered, “but I’ve got to get a piano. Haven’t been out long. Still getting adjusted.”

I didn’t beat around the bush, not with cars whizzing by. “I’m producing a show at the Kennedy Center and I want you to do some of your stuff there.” Unenthusiastically he responded, “Sure.” I understood why there was a lack of energy. He was still in shock at the outside world, still trying to get acclimated to the cars, the need to pay for his own food and lodging, the lack of organizations to help and the prejudice ex-prisoners face from family and everyone else.

He gave me his telephone number after I gave him mine along with the details of the show. “Can you,” he said in a weak voice, “stay in touch to...to remind me?” Had I not been in prison for 10 years and then faced the hostility of a changed world myself, his request would have seemed pathetic. I’m a producer, not a babysitter. But in prison, one doesn’t keep track of days or hours. That’s what the staff does. They tell prisoners when to eat, play, worship and, finally, when to go home. Even when no home remains and the only option is a homeless shelter.

Without a grimace or a condescending word, I shook his hand firmly, led him to the safety of the sidewalk, and promised to call to remind him. I said I’d also arrange to have a piano for him at the Kennedy Center.
The piano arrived on the day of the show, but not my old enemy/friend. I had fulfilled my pledge to give him reminders, doing so often. What had happened? He had never been shy about performing before so it could not have been stage fright. My conclusion was that he had worked his way back to prison, preferring it to the outside world, even the exalted world of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

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I fared better at the show with performance groups than individuals. Just as there is strength in numbers, there is also the likelihood that at least some members of a group will show up. Being former prisoners, the ones who made it knew how to improvise with the extra time I gave them to fill in for absent performers. While an exact script could no longer be followed if all members of a group were not present, they could fake it. Their experience in relating to prison officers, where lying is the norm, served them well.

One group consisted of 10 singers who had performed in prison together. That was many years before, but they had somehow managed to stay in touch. They were set to perform their songs while giving commentary about their incarcerated years. Only three of the members showed up. Still, they put on a great show. So good that I wondered if there really had been 10 members. As with everyone else in the program, I had all their names, which I used to prepare paychecks for each person. At the end of their performance, the leader of the group approached me for their checks. I gave him three, one for each performing member. But he wanted them all. He explained that the others were somewhere in the building but were having trouble finding our location. The leader must have had very dumb officers in his prison to come up with such a weak lie. Nonetheless, I relented. I did it for political reasons. This individual knew a lot of movers and shakers in DC, and in fact was one himself. The checks, relatively small amounts because of the large number in his cast, was a small price to pay to appease him. My instincts about him paid off. He became a strong supporter of the Foundation, doing many valuable favors for us that were important to our growth. Not only that, but a week after the Kennedy Center program he mailed me an envelope in which he returned 5 of the 10 checks, un-cashed. He said something about being unable to locate the other members. Perhaps they were still wandering about the Kennedy Center. I know the feeling since I too was reluctant to leave.
I had scheduled a lot of people to perform as a safety valve. That was both a relief and a headache for me. A relief because I didn’t have to worry about filling in gaps for no-shows, though they proved rare. I told the various troupes to come prepared to do more than the time I allotted them in the event I needed to cover empty space. Having a large cast made my job as a producer more difficult because of the many personalities involved. The players came in two categories: the under-confident and the over-confident.

In the first was Harry “Cupcake” Coleman, an ex-con who traveled to Washington to perform amid great fanfare from his hometown supporters. He epitomized success among re-entering prisoners after first traveling a bumpy road. But Cupcake had finally emerged on top. His appearance at the Kennedy Center was icing on the cake of his many accomplishments. Even his hometown newspaper recognized this by giving him major coverage during his preparations for the show.

Cupcake arrived with his own manager, a woman who had paid his telephone bill during his leaner days. She was very professional and personable. She was lucky to have him to represent. His music and his delivery of it was excellent. Plus he dressed like a star. I was lucky to have him as I watched him primping himself to go on. But as the time for his entry neared, he disappeared. So did his manager. When she emerged she waved to indicate she wanted to talk to me. We found a place to chat. She said, “He’s not going on. He’s getting ready to leave.” I avoided words like shit and fuck, which I rarely use, even in writing, but which were racing through my mind at the time. I asked to speak to him, alone. Man to man, ex-con to ex-con. When I did, I began to pour it on. I convinced him to stay. I expected to have a harder job doing this. Maybe he had been teasing her. Or wanted more attention. He said that he hadn’t felt well. But I didn’t care. It’s not like he was going to pilot a jet. He only had a few lines and a few songs, then good-bye. Even a crash landing would be better than no flight at all.

Still I was nervous. “Let’s move you up on the program so you can get it over with; do it sooner rather than later.” I knew that an actor on stage is worth two in the wings when they’re not up to performing. He seemed calmer after our talk but I am told that people who commit suicide are relaxed before executing the act. In their mind they are already dead, so their worries and fears have dissipated. Cupcake told me that he would rather wait, which I agreed to since I had other things to deal with. He finally went on and gave his performance. It was powerful and flawless.
Another performer, overconfident, was the lead in a short musical I had written about Billie Holliday. This performer played the title character. I knew that her singing and acting would fit well. She had never spent time in prison, as was true for a few other cast members. I’ll go further and say that she was my ringer. She had performed at the Opera House of the Kennedy Center and other top stages. I knew her from church music that we had performed together. Since I would be playing the guitar as an accompanist in the Holliday play, I wanted someone with whom I could easily work. I thought it was she, but she didn’t show for two rehearsals, always calling at the last minute with an excuse. It was as if she didn’t need a rehearsal, which she probably didn’t. But I did. There were cues and verbal intros that I had to follow in order to begin my playing at appropriate times. The rehearsals were important to help me get the transitions smooth for the show.

Maybe she was getting into the Billie Holliday character by acting irresponsible. Holliday had behaved erratically at times due to her excessive drug and alcohol use. The woman playing her in my musical seemed to be overdosing on diva-ism. I finally got her into a rehearsal. It was at her convenience and, unfortunately for me, took place the day of the show. I’m lucky I survived that busy day with my heart still beating. Also lucky that my own short play went over well. I think that’s largely because of its subject. Billie Holliday was in some ways a mess, but in more ways a marvel. She survived two terms of harsh imprisonment, one in the 1930’s for having consensual sex for compensation and the other in the 1940’s for personal drug use. Rather than help her, these periods of caging hampered her career and hastened her demise.

Most of the men and women who wrote for and performed at the first “Prison to the Stage” show at the Kennedy Center had been to prison themselves. That was also true for a large segment of the audience who came to support their brothers and sisters. So many came, that the place was packed well before the show began. More chairs were brought in. Then even more. Finally, there were many standees in the back. I counted them as being five deep. They were quiet in deference to the performers, but loud in their applause. Even our miscues—again, not my fault, at least not completely I don’t think—were treated respectfully. The program reminded me of prison when I performed newly-written, under-rehearsed material. “Take your time brother,” some of the prisoners listening would shout. The Kennedy Center audience behaved with the same generous spirit.

After the program, I spoke to one of the red-clad Kennedy Center ushers who had been assigned to our performance location.
She told me that large numbers of people had to be turned away because of lack of space and she congratulated us on a successful program. I got her name and quoted her when I sent a thank you email to Gregg Henry the next day. I didn’t ask for a response and he didn’t give one. Was he already involved in another project considering his heavy workload? Or did he think that our contribution to the Page-to-Stage Festival could have been more significant? I’d deal with that next year with fresh energy and new strategies. Little did I realize that my son and sister would pull out all stops to put me back in jail by then. Even when I saw the frightening storm clouds forming, I was determined to return to the Kennedy Center for a bigger and better show. With the help of God and Gregg Henry, not necessarily in that order of importance, I hoped to have a chance to do that.
Chapter 9

Crisis and Jail Between Seasons

The trouble with crises is that they start out as insignificant events, rendering you vulnerable and unprepared. When Bob Marley was diagnosed with melanoma cancer of the toe, he refused treatment. It didn’t seem important. When doctors suggested amputation, it went against Rastafarian principles of keeping the body whole. By the time it became a crisis, the cancer had spread to his liver, lungs, and stomach. Finally it reached his brain. At the age of 36, the untreated cancer killed the legendary singer.

In pushing the envelope and hoping to survive, Bob Marley was an optimist. But he lost. Just as I did when I reached out to my sister on her 58th birthday on February 27, 2007. I sent her a Happy Birthday email and gave her a gift in my message that I thought she would accept. My gift: I said that she and my son could keep my inheritance and my savings that they had taken from me when I was in prison. The money was no longer needed by me. I felt the matter should be put to rest. I even apologized for any “missteps” I made in pursuing it. Could we place the entire thing behind us?

The previous year she had moved from her long-time home in Hawaii. There, her vitriolic personality had gotten her fired from a prestigious job as director of a real estate association. She compounded her error by trying to oust the association’s board and then threatened to sue everyone in sight if she didn’t get her job back. She didn’t. Rather, she got the reputation of being a sore loser. A prominent newspaper ran regular stories about her failed fight. What else could she do but get out of town to start life anew somewhere else? Because Utah was a favorite vacation spot for her, that’s where she headed. She also had political contacts there to help her get another prestigious job. This time she chose public service in an attempt to rehabilitate her image. She landed a regional directorship with United Way of Salt Lake City. I have no doubt that she bought the job with her money—my money.

Nonetheless, one of my own political contacts in Utah, where the national scope of my Foundation extended, gave me her private email address. This person encouraged me to contact my sister, assuring me that she had mellowed with age in her new mountain environment. Besides, she was now in a helping profession. How hypocritical it would be if she extended her hand to strangers but used the same hand to slap her own brother.
I decided to take the plunge, exerting great care and compassion in composing my email to her. I didn’t even hint that she had done anything wrong. My message was simply that we should focus on the future and forget the past. She and my son could keep everything and the matter would never be discussed again.

But that wasn’t enough for her. Her response was angry and insulting. That surprised me since she had always been magnanimous on her own birthday, a special event she shared with our beloved father who had been born on the same day. I carried her home from the hospital, a proud and suddenly very responsible five-year old. For the next 50 years, we were as close as any brother and sister could be. Then came the chance for her to seize my money while I was in prison, and her need for money overcame her sense of sisterly love.

I’m sorry to say that I did not react to her vexatious email reply very well, particularly when she claimed to speak for my son in it as well as herself, and to do so in the most unpleasant of terms. An unhappy exchange of more emails followed. Then I gave up. At the end of the year during the Holiday season, I tried a final time through a third party to reach out to her. Perhaps the spirit of Christmas had softened her. But the hardness and hatred had grown. She vowed to put me back in jail, saying that the stay away order she had gotten against me in Hawaii was not for one year, as we had both believed, but for three. Plus, it extended to Utah. My son had obviously interceded to give her legal advice, a consigliere whispering in the ear of a Mafioso. She celebrated her 59th birthday at the beginning of 2008 with the happy assurance by my son that they would work together to put me back in jail, and for a long time. Meanwhile, he had his own initiative going against me in Washington. He was using his position and power as an Assistant Attorney General to independently re-incarcerate me. Fortunately, I didn’t know it at the time. All was quiet as the spring of 2008 arrived.

But quiet regrettably also extended to Gregg Henry of the Kennedy Center. After sending him a few emails about the urgency of my Foundation’s need to plan for the second “Prison to the Stage” program, I half expected him to seek a stay away order against me also. His silence told me that he wasn’t impressed with our show in its inaugural edition. I guess neither was I, if truth be told. But I knew we could do better, if only he would give us a second chance. To help get that opportunity, I decided to do something drastic. There was little to lose. The Kennedy Center program had become the Foundation’s flagship event, and now it was sinking. I decided to use the nuclear option.
Just as Washington, DC, is not a big city, so the entire world is not as large as most people believe. You can see most of it in relatively short order if you stick to the main attractions in all the principal countries.

The same goes for famous people. If you’re persistent and seek them out, you stand a good chance of coming in contact with many. In my lifetime, I have met several, including a couple of truly historic figures. The person who shook my hand as he gave me my college diploma was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., our graduation commencement speaker. I met Bobby Kennedy following a political event as he waited for his car to arrive. We chatted for 10 full minutes at curbside, just him and me.

In prison, I wrote to many people in the literary and arts world to get their opinion of my work; sometimes to give my opinion of theirs. This is how I came to recruit a number of outstanding individuals for the board of the Foundation. When I wrote my first play in prison, I sent it to theaters in Washington, DC. I’d be returning there after my decade of imprisonment so I was looking for opportunities. Might as well start making contacts as soon as possible so I’d have something to fall back on if everything else fell apart. Even if I only got a few from small theaters, at least that would be something.

Imagine my surprise when I received a response from the Kennedy Center. It didn’t come from a top person there, but that didn’t matter. The letter was written on Kennedy Center stationary and was very positive. It was, in fact, too positive, though that didn’t occur to me at the time. All I knew was that I had snared a live fish on my line, and a huge one. Little did I realize that the fish had no intention of being caught, that it was just trying to be polite.

The signer of the letter was Max Woodward. He said that he’d hold onto my play at the Kennedy Center in the event that an opportunity came for it to be considered for a production. It was skillfully worded: non-committal yet artfully written to be hopeful. A little bit of encouragement to an optimistic person such as I can go a long way.

During my 10 years in prison, I stayed in touch with Woodward, but he didn’t stay in touch with me. Not once did he respond to my follow-up letters. It didn’t matter to me since nothing he could write could surpass the quality and impact of his first letter. Besides, he hadn’t asked me to respond. He had made an affirmative statement and left it at that. Either I understood it or I didn’t. And if I
were too dense to understand, he wouldn’t want to deal with me. If I
did understand, I would know that there wasn’t anything more for
him to say. I might have had the time to engage in light social
 correspondence, but he didn’t. Too bad I wasn’t in his situation, I
thought. Such a man is obviously going places. I backed off, sending
him only an occasional holiday card with the briefest of messages.
Because they were not returned to me by the post office or the
Kennedy Center, I knew that Woodward was still there. It gave me
hope.

He had written his one and only terrific letter in 1993. In
2003, I exited prison with it, still in pristine condition. I didn’t plan to
look up Woodward for a while. First I wanted to get out of the cold
that came from my family and the winter weather. I had to put down
new physical and emotional roots before I ended up back in prison. I
ended up there because there I would find friends, a meal ticket and a
warm bed waiting.

I went to the Kennedy Center to see shows. You can see a
free one 365 days a year, all of high quality. I was very impressed by
them. Even more so when I learned that Max Woodward had become
a big wig in the place, serving in the powerful position of the center’s
vice president. It would not have impressed me more had I learned
that he’d become President of the United States. Now I knew more
than ever that I had to make something of myself before I knocked on
his door. If he saw me as a vagrant with good intentions, he might
give me a dollar. But if he perceived me as a rising star in the process
of fulfilling realistic artistic goals, maybe he’d provide guidance and
introductions. As is said about show business, it’s all a matter of
timing.

Still, I stayed in touch. Now it was easy. All I had to do was
drop an envelope off at the information desk of the Kennedy Center
when I came there. No postage required. “This envelope is for
Kennedy Center Vice President Max Woodward,” I would say
grandly. It was readily accepted by personnel on duty.

As with my prison letters and cards to Woodward, I didn’t
write them often. There had to be a significant development for me to
do that, such as when I released my first and second CDs, Prison
Tracks and Christmas in Prison. Of course, I included the CDs in my
envelopes to him. I wanted to build up credibility with Woodward.
When I arranged to produce the first “Prison to the Stage” program at
the Kennedy Center’s Page-to-the-Stage Festival, he was among the
first to know.
In the spring of 2008, I was calling Max Woodward my friend of 15 years. Of course he might call me something else. A pest? A dreamer? Or to quote the words of a famous song by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, “a cockeyed optimist.” After all, he could count on one hand the number of times he had communicated with me. In fact he could use one finger for such a tabulation. I wish I had done something more to cultivate the friendship, particularly now when I felt I needed it. But what could I have done? Send him one of my ears?

The time had come to use him. I had no choice. The months were getting short and I had not heard from Gregg Henry. Max Woodward became my nuclear weapon.

In deciding to drop him on Henry, I knew the risk I would be taking. It could easily explode in my face, as all bombs can. Just as bad, the explosive device could prove to be a dud. That could happen if Henry did so little as go down the hall to speak to Woodward, whose likely response would be, “He called me a friend? You’re kidding!” After the two men laughed their heads off, my head would be in Henry’s sights. He’d come gunning for me without fear, knowing I had only been shooting blanks. He’d blast me out of the water, the Potomac River, which runs adjacent to the Kennedy Center. I’d never swim in this town again.

But I went ahead anyway and did it. The fact is that Woodward was my friend, just as my son and sister were my family. We might not be close, but that doesn’t mean a relationship doesn’t exist. At least Woodward wasn’t trying to put me back in jail as my son and sister were scheming to do. Little did I know at the time how well their plan would work. Thanks to their coordinated efforts, and a minor miscalculation on my part, I would end up back in jail before getting another chance at the Kennedy Center. Now, there’s a challenge in carrying out the theater tradition of “the show must go on.”

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As usual, I would be going back to jail as an innocent person. I know what you’re thinking. Doesn’t everyone who’s locked up say that? Well, yes. But there’s a certain amount of truth to it. For example, I met a bank robber in Atlanta Federal Penitentiary who had had his heart set on an automobile. No, he didn’t plan to steal it but rather to buy it. However, the bank turned him down cold for a car loan. So he went back and robbed the bank and to take something extra for his trouble. He faked being a woman, complete with dress;
he also carried a fake gun. But he got caught. Was he innocent? I’d argue yes: innocent by reason of insanity.

I was innocent when I landed back in jail a third time for a different reason. I had made a mistake. In fact two of them; one related to my son and the other to my sister. I’m not talking about mistakes in judgment, but rather genuine, anybody-can-make-em errors. I’ll let you decide.

The first inkling I had of trouble was when I was surrounded by police and handcuffed. That was a bad sign indeed. It happened in the basement of City Hall in Washington, DC. I had arrived at the building, as I had often done for the past 30 years, to conduct business there as a citizen. In the past, I had visited as a political candidate, a representative of civic groups, and a spokesperson for political organizations. I came on this occasion to speak for the Foundation at a public hearing.

I should have anticipated trouble since this was a budget hearing that related to my son’s agency, the DC Attorney General’s Office. My son could use this opportunity to be a hero for his department. He’d sacrifice his father for the benefit of his career. To paraphrase the Bible: What greater love hath a man than for his job? He knew I was there to criticize his agency as I had done in the past. I had no intention of bringing our personal matter into my testimony. I believed he was a good attorney. Every time he puts me in jail he proves that. And he was about to prove it again, beyond anyone’s expectations, by subjugating my First Amendment right to speak at a public hearing to his personal interest in jailing me.

He knew what I was going to say. New priorities were needed in his agency. I had said the same thing for years: that the DC Attorney General’s office engages in corrupt and wasteful practices. I’m not talking about corruption in the bribery sense. Rather it consists of applying the law unevenly. The agency prosecutes victimless law violators, but primarily black, poor and politically unconnected defendants. That’s why the DC jail is disproportionately crammed with such people. If you’ve got power and do something illegal but consensual in private, chances are that the prosecuting agency will leave you alone. But the poor and the powerless will have their doors broken down and will be hauled to jail, even in the absence of anyone knowing or complaining about their private affairs. What can be more wasteful than this? Taxpayer’s resources wasted by paying prosecutors to nail victimless people and then wasting even more money by having them sit in jail.

I had a forceful speech prepared but didn’t have a chance to give it due to my son’s intervention. In stopping me, he ignored the
fact that I was on the witness list to testify at the hearing on that day: April 2, 2008. I was put on the list by a council member who chaired the city’s judiciary committee and who was conducting the hearing. He knew I had a right to testify at the hearing even if my son didn’t; even if a subsequent judge in deciding my freedom didn’t.

When I arrived at City Hall to testify, I sensed something being wrong. There were more police than usual. They were members of a spinoff force, the DC Protective Services that guards City Hall. I like the police. They’re my friends. I just don’t like what they do sometimes. As churchgoers say, “Hate the sin, not the sinner.”

“Can I see your ID,” said one of them as I passed through the metal detector. Showing ID was standard. But what he did with mine was not. He took it to his desk, looked at something there, and then returned it to me. At my subsequent trial, I learned that he compared my ID photo with a photo my son had provided him of me. My son also gave the police a copy of the stay away order. He gave instructions as an Assistant Attorney General that I should be arrested if I stepped foot in the building.

The cop wasn’t so sure this was good advice. A son was trying to get his peaceful, unarmed, law-abiding and well dressed—for the television cameras at the hearing—father arrested. It seemed like a prank a kid would pull on his dad, even a grown kid with a fancy title and a lot of influence.

“What brings you to City Hall?” the officer said. An odd question. Like a traffic cop asking you where you are going when you cross a street. The street is a public place, as is City Hall. Even my son’s attorney and colleague pointed that out when we were in the court hallway together the year before.

Nonetheless, I’m a friendly guy. I thought that maybe the officer was bored, wanted to chat. “I’m here to testify at a judiciary hearing. I’m on the witness list.”

“You are?” My son had apparently not added that detail. The cop went over to speak to his colleagues. When he returned he asked me if he could accompany me to the hearing. It was in the council hearing chambers on the fifth floor. Where I had gone hundreds of times before. Unescorted.

I said I had no problem with that, but I asked the reason. He answered with a straight face. “We’ve had trouble with people wondering around the building.” I shrugged my shoulders and we both headed for the elevator. We entered one and he was about to press the button for the fifth floor, but before he could, one of his colleagues hurriedly joined us on the elevator. “I’m afraid they want him in the basement instead.” The new officer had apparently
checked with my son when his partner had gone with me to the elevator. My son didn’t want me in the building; he wanted me in jail.

Down to the basement we went. Waiting for us there in an official looking office was a larger contingent of police. Reinforcements? Then came the war of words, actually more of a cordial exchange. The head officer, who wore a better cut and lighter uniform than the others, waved something at me. It scared me more than any firearm; it was the stay away order. I knew he had gotten it from my son, along with an earful of information about my son’s fear and his need for protection from his father. I knew also that I had to do a lot of talking at that point to keep from going to jail. My adversaries were a shrewd and conscienceless Assistant Attorney General and now an entire police force. An equivalent situation would be going over a waterfall into a pool filled with piranhas and a shark as their leader. As I slid down Niagara, my prospects didn’t seem promising. The ride took more than an hour. That’s how long it took the police to ignore common sense and go with the law, as interpreted by the aforementioned shark. The hour wasn’t filled with talk completely. At one point, the head officer went “upstairs” to confirm my story that I was on the witness list. When he returned, apparently satisfied, he got on the phone. When he hung up, he renewed his threat to arrest me. He had gotten a pep talk from the person named in the protective order. What else could he do since he was an officer in the “DC Protective Services” but “protect and serve.”

My chances of escape soon ended. Having the US Constitution on my side that allowed me to be present at public hearings wasn’t enough! That was just a piece of paper that couldn’t get the cops fired, but my son could. Maybe even get them prosecuted for not doing their jobs. If he could stomp on his own father without mercy, imagine what he would to them. Besides, they had their own piece of paper: the stay away order my son had handed them. It was time for me to attack it directly; to put aside my noble thoughts of First Amendment freedoms and a citizen’s right to go to City Hall.

“When that order was issued in court,” I said, “the judge ruled that I had a right to come to City Hall. She knew that my son worked there and said I still could come. I have a right to testify though not to have contact with him directly. The hearing will be over by the time you get through with me.” And a lot of other hearings, as it turned out.

The head officer spoke, “What judge said that? What was his or her name?” He was skeptical; deservedly so. Why hadn’t my son
mentioned this if it were true? A son doesn’t lie about his father, nor an Attorney General about his quarry, does he? The officer became even more apprehensive when I couldn’t name the judge. I even looked in the carrying case I held for some legal paper with her name on it. Anything to jog my memory. But I found nothing either in the case or in my mind. I must have been in shock. Otherwise I would have realized that the name of Judge Linda Turner appeared on the very document the officer was holding. He finally said, “You should have gotten permission from the judge in writing. There’s nothing we can do without it.”

That was the cue for another cop to read me my rights. Then handcuff me. Or maybe it was the other way around. As I said, I was in shock. But I recovered enough to say, “I still want to testify at the hearing; even in these handcuffs. I have a right to testify and I’m expected there. Come with me to guard me and afterwards you can take me wherever you wish.” But they said no. They even rejected my request for them to bring copies of my testimony to the hearing which I had brought for the council members presiding over it. It’s something I always do, a procedure followed by most hearing speakers.

They took me out of the building through a basement exit. On the way out, an older police officer saw me. He was someone I had known from many years before. Like other old timers in the building, he knew how often I had come to City Hall to participate in meetings and events there. “What’s going on Dennis?” he said, seeing my hands behind my back and my disheveled appearance from a brisk search. My tie had been removed so I couldn’t hang myself wherever they were taking me. They also had insisted that my shirt not be tucked back into my trousers, for what reason I don’t know. I answered my friend in uniform without telling him all the details. He’d get that soon enough from his colleagues. “This place has changed a lot,” I said. “I now know why most people are apathetic about politics. They’re afraid this kind of treatment will happen to them.”

For the next 26 hours I sat alone in a jail cell in a police station, given a single cheese sandwich and not permitted to make any calls. During that time, my friends were calling every hospital in the region to try to locate me. I was finally brought to the courthouse and provided an attorney. We appeared before a judge who released me on my own recognizance after setting a date for my return to answer the charges. I immediately went to the police station to get my wallet, cell phone, keys and case. And kept returning. It took three days for them to find them. Apparently, when the Protective Services makes
an arrest, the property of the person they’ve apprehended is kept in a special place. Or perhaps I was the first person that this usually dormant force ever arrested.

I thanked the court-appointed lawyer who had assisted me at the hearing. Then promptly fired him to retain one who knew about First Amendment issues and who sensed a landmark case here.

Her name is Stephanie Snyder, a lawyer at the highly regarded Criminal Justice Clinic of Georgetown University Law Center. She questioned me thoroughly. Snyder said that even if Judge Turner didn’t give me permission to go to City Hall, I probably had a defense because I was there on official business, and I didn’t try to or actually see my son while there. I smiled, “I’ll even testify that the 10 or so other times I was at City Hall in the past year, I didn’t try to see him. I always kept my distance from his office.” She didn’t smile. Snyder didn’t smile when she was thinking, and she was usually thinking. “You don’t want to tell anyone of your previous visits there. They can charge you with each one if they want to be nasty.” My smile disappeared as she continued. “Let’s get the transcript of Judge Turner’s hearing where you say she gave permission and see what it says.” She was sounding like one of the cops. But I kept my cool, kind of. “I told you what it says! There’s no reason to doubt me!” When the transcripts arrived in a month, I saw, much to my fright and dismay, why she questioned my memory. I was on the waterfall spiraling downward again.

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The phone rang; I answered it with reluctance. My City Hall arrest had only occurred a few days before and I was still upset. The shock had gone but the fear and uncertainty had continued. If citizens could not feel safe at City Hall, where could they?

It wasn’t a friendly voice on the phone. But it wasn’t exactly unkind either. More official than anything else. Like an articulate police officer. But it wasn’t a cop. It was Gregg Henry.

I hoped I hadn’t offended him by dropping a bomb in his lap; i.e., the name of Kennedy Center Vice President Max Woodward. Not only had I used his name in my email to Henry, but I stated a specific role I wanted Woodward to play in “our next Prison to the Stage program.” I said that Woodward had been one of my heroes and role models ever since he wrote me while I was in prison. That he’d been a big help to me over the years. That without his encouragement, I might never have sought out the Kennedy Center for our program. If that weren’t brazen enough, I told Henry that I
had invited Woodward to the next “Prison to the Stage” program so we could honor him for his assistance. On this last point, I had covered myself by actually sending Woodward such an invitation. I didn’t ask for a response from Woodward and didn’t get one. Why would he communicate with me now when he hadn’t for a full 15 years? I said in my latest note to him that I’d write him again as soon as “Mr. Gregg Henry gives us a firm date for our next program. Then you can decide if your busy schedule will allow you to attend. Thank you very much. Best wishes as always, Dennis Sobin.”

When Henry called, he didn’t give me a date. In fact he wasn’t sure he’d invite us back at all. He had problems with our show the previous year. He wanted to talk about them. Anything, I figured, as long as he didn’t hang up. If he did, I’d be dead in the water at the base of the waterfall. I had no more ammunition to use. My big gun was empty, and maybe now it would be pointed at me if he had spoken to Woodward. But I got the impression he hadn’t. Or if he had, the vice president, my alleged friend, had somehow covered for me. At least minimally.

The fact was that Henry was addressing me as a producer, keeping me on the phone, speaking his mind. Clearly he considered me a novice producer, a blundering producer, an artist-type-person-with-a-lot-to-learn producer. But a producer nonetheless. I stayed glued and braced myself to hear once more the errors I had committed during the first year: our guerrilla marketing, the illicit sound system, the…. But Henry didn’t want to talk about those sins. He had a much more serious one to discuss; a fatal or near-fatal transgression.

“The Page-to-Stage Festival,” he said, “is about new plays and musicals. What you presented was not a collection of those. You performed a variety show!”

I instantly and apologetically agreed with him. My reasons for doing the show that way, I stammered, was that I had little time to prepare, was uncertain about the space we were getting, and anything else I could think of. These excuses didn’t impress him. He didn’t want excuses, but results. I assured him that the next year would be different; that I had already begun to solicit plays and musicals, which was true. The large audience we attracted was helping to spread the word. I had hoped to do what Gregg wanted even before he told me this requirement. “It will be done,” I said with authority, “because we can now do it.”

But how would that happen in the small space we had been given? If we filled it to overflowing last time, what would happen when we presented an even better show? We could end up with a riot. People don’t like to be turned away, especially twice in a row. It
conveys contempt for them. They might rebel, particularly some of the short-tempered people I knew that our audience included. Try putting on a big show in prison and excluding half the inmate population. See what happens. That’s why performances are held in prison in large recreation yards, where everyone can be accommodated. At the first Kennedy Center show, one of the ushers assigned to us saw the disappointed faces of those turned away for lack of space. “The Kennedy Center needs to give you a real stage that can handle a lot more people,” she said. It was a problem that Gregg Henry would soon address.

When he called me back again, he said we would be included in the festival. Not only that but we would have a prime stage: the Millennium Stage. All the people we had attracted to our show the last time, and then some, could be seated there.

The outstanding news stunned me. I now knew what it felt like to receive an Oscar or the Nobel Prize. I was speechless, though only for a second. “Can we still get our great time spot, Saturday night?” Henry said yes, that’s what he had in mind. This was cause to celebrate. The Millennium Stage is my favorite venue at the Kennedy Center. It’s on the ground floor and is easily accessible from different approaches. You can also enter it from the outside promenade that overlooks the Potomac River. One side of the Millennium Stage is a glass wall that looks out onto the promenade and the river. There is natural light during the daytime and the stars twinkling above at night. It’s a first-class stage, fully equipped with professional sound and lighting. Trained and experienced union personnel operate all of it. Whatever our needs and wishes, they could fulfill. There is a beautiful Steinway grand piano in the wings for our use that can be positioned anywhere.

I wasted no time broadcasting this great news to the thousands of friends and supporters on the Foundation’s email list. The response was as good as I expected. The people who had attended the first “Prison to the Stage” program marveled at our progress. We would attract quality plays and musicals there. It was as if we had gone from a cabin to a mansion. Word soon spread. I took it upon myself to inform Max Woodward by way of another note. I might never meet or hear from him, but he seemed a source of good luck, and possibly covert assistance. Either way, Woodward deserved to be kept in the loop.

The good news about the Kennedy Center took away the sting of what my son was doing to me. Still, I thought I would triumph when I faced him head on in court again. He might be a lawyer and have an entire army of pros in his Office of the Attorney
General behind him, but I had a destiny to fulfill, not to mention a fine attorney in Stephanie Snyder.

Most people are full of fear when they’re summoned to court. Not me. I know that the legal process is a long and tedious affair. It usually involves many court appearances before a ruling is made. That means, in the worse case scenario, that even if you’re accused of a crime, you’re not going to be hauled off to jail on your first court date. There are motions to be argued, trial dates to be set, and other preliminary matters to be heard and ruled upon.

At my first appearance to answer the charges that my son had leveled against me for going to City Hall, he wasn’t even there. It’s purpose was to set a trial date, though not even that would happen if the charge against me was dropped at that point. I fully expected this to happen. Any number of people, from the judge to my son’s boss I thought, would come to their senses and intervene.

The morning I left for court for this “status hearing,” an initial appearance is called, a few non-lawyer friends expressed concern. Would I be alright? Did I want anyone to accompany me? What if it was a trick and they were using this court date as a pretext to put me in jail? Try as I did to convince them that they were reading too many exaggerated courtroom novels, or were watching too many conspiracy movies, I couldn’t dissuade them. They only knew that I had once been locked up for going to City Hall, the seat of democracy. I tried to explain that what happened to me there was a fluke, a one in a trillion possibility. There was even less of a chance of it happening in court where legal minds, as opposed to police mentalities, were in charge.

It’s good to have friends but sometimes their over-concern for your well-being can be annoying. Their fear can come from ignorance. I said my goodbyes and headed for court with a smile on my face after confirming a dinner appointment that evening. No way would I not make it, unless I dropped dead before then. And I felt that I would indeed drop dead if any move was made in court, against all expectations and precedents, to keep me from going home.

The status hearing started out routinely with Snyder and my son’s attorney setting a trial date. Judge Jose Lopez, who had been assigned to the matter in random fashion, confirmed the date and entered it into the court calendar. That should have been the end of the hearing, a simple logistical affair. But it wasn’t. God help me, it wasn’t.

“We have another matter, your Honor, before we leave the courtroom,” my son’s attorney said. She lifted a paper in her hand and I swallowed hard. This wasn’t part of the script. But apparently it
was for her, although Snyder and I did not have a copy. Aware of this new script was the court bailiff, a U.S. Marshall stationed there. As if on cue when the paper was raised by the prosecuting attorney, he walked over and stood behind me. I tried to swallow again, but this time the imaginary lump would not go away. When a marshall stands behind a defendant in court it only means one thing: that the person in front of him is about to go to jail. You usually see it happen during a sentencing hearing. Or at a probation revocation proceeding. If the judge decides on jail for the person, there’s no way to escape. The Marshall immediately grabs him and brings him to one of the cells behind the courtroom to await transport to the jail.

Why me? How could such a routine hearing wind up with me in such a predicament? I’d made no preparations to be away, no instructions to colleagues, no cancellations of performances or other engagements. I wouldn’t even have a chance to apologize to my friends for laughing at their presumptions for thinking this could happen. They now seemed to me Einstein-level geniuses or Moses-clone prophets.

I soon learned that my son, with the help of my sister, had worked hard to bring this unusual scenario about. The two of them had conspired to find a prosecutor in DC to issue an arrest warrant against me. As incredible as it may seem, I was being charged with four counts of violating the stay away order that my sister had gotten against me in Hawaii. Despite her move to Utah, it had remained in effect; and not for just one year as DC orders of this type are valid for, but for three. If this sounds confusing to you, it was no less a muddle to me. The four counts I was being arrested for related to the email exchange I had with her on and after her birthday the year before. Not only was I not aware that the law was being breached when I did it, but my sister didn’t know either. Otherwise she would have said so when she replied to my pleasant birthday email. But my lawyer son knew. Or did the research to find out. He also knew a government attorney willing to prosecute such a minor matter.

For me it wasn’t minor. On each of the four counts, I faced six months in jail; a total of two years. The way my luck was running with my family, I knew it could well happen.

Judge Lopez had no control over what was happening in his courtroom. He might not like it, but he couldn’t stop it. My son’s attorney had the proper paperwork. The Marshall had no choice but to arrest me and take me into custody; in other words, to jail. Upon hearing that this would be my fate, I grew weak. Thankfully the Marshall had my arm or I would have fallen. He brought me through the rear door of the courtroom and was about to put me in one of the
cells when I collapsed and lost consciousness. A stroke? A fainting spell? All I know is that I was revived by an emergency medical team that had entered with a stretcher and hospital equipment through the courtroom. There was a small crowd in that narrow corridor consisting mostly of medical personnel. “We want to take you to the hospital to check you out,” said one of the medical members. “You may have suffered something serious.”

I thought about it for a moment. My arms and legs seemed alright; no numbness, which is one of the signs of a stroke. “How are my vital signs?” I asked. He said, “They check out okay now, but a few minutes ago they were off.” I had a decision to make. Assuming that I had fainted, the last place I wanted to go was a hospital. Because I was under arrest and in custody, it wouldn’t be a normal hospital stay. I would be kept in a “secure wing” under guard. I wouldn’t be allowed to leave; no checking out. After one or more days there, a doctor in charge would either pronounce me okay or dead. Assuming the former, I would be chained, put in a jail van and driven to jail. After a night or so there, I would be shipped back to court for my arraignment. Then a judge would either let me go, as one did before on personal recognizance, set bond or hold me in jail without bond. But if I didn’t go to the hospital, maybe I could speed up the process. I decided to take my chances, both health-wise and justice-wise. I dismissed the medical team.

My next stop, a half hour later, was the bullpen in the courthouse basement, a series of large cages in which many criminal defendants are cramped. How long I’d be there or where I was headed afterwards, I didn’t know. I was so disgusted at that moment with the legal system, my family, and my own naiveté that I didn’t much care. Let me do the two years that my sister was demanding and the additional time my son wanted for my City Hall visit right there. Underground several levels, this holding dungeon was the equivalent of a deep cemetery plot. They had accomplished their goal in burying me.

I looked down the long corridor adjoining the bullpen where vigilant and often abrasive U.S. Marshalls patrolled. Unlike their counterparts in the upstairs courtrooms, they were commonly on their worst behavior here with no one to observe them. The corridor reminded me of a long tunnel at the base of a haunted mountain. I strained to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

Then I saw it. The light. It was a DC police officer, a friendly one, a person who looked familiar, a face I knew. He pointed to me and one of the jailors let me out. The officer gently handcuffed me and led me to an exit and to his waiting patrol car. Then he
carefully placed me inside. He said he’d expedite the process of my booking. With a little luck I could be released in a few hours, he said.

I’d met him a month before when he came to my residence. He’d been contacted by my son and sister to investigate me. They called me dangerous, but he came to a different conclusion after talking to me and several of my neighbors. When I told him the story of my lawsuit against my son and sister for the stolen funds, he seemed to understand. He also saw the odds against me, two well-connected and affluent individuals against one struggling ex-con. I believe he came to the bullpen to even the odds for my survival.

Whatever his motivation, an angel would not have been more welcome. He asked me how I felt and I told him. “I had a rough time in court; I wasn’t prepared for what happened. My son and sister sucker punched me. But I’ve got my wind back now and I’m okay.” After being booked for the latest accusation, I was back in a courtroom before an arraignment judge who let me go on my personal word to return. Now I had two dates in court. One to face my sister’s fangs, the other to deal with my son’s venom. They were like a tag team of snake-clad wrestlers. And I was alone.

That’s not entirely true. I had Stephanie Snyder who was enthused as ever about representing me. I guess I was becoming a more interesting case by the minute. Like a patient whose doctor discovers he not only has a diseased heart, but two of them. Whether or not Snyder saw me as a freak, she must have sensed something freakish about my family and, by extension, the Attorney General’s Office of my son and the United Way of my sister. Normal families and public institutions do not operate like that, particularly in dealing with family members who also qualify as senior citizens. Chances are I’d be leaving this earth before my son and sister. What’s wrong with a little patience on their part?

The knot of possible imprisonment was drawing tighter around my neck as the Kennedy Center show got nearer. The timing for my son and sister to jointly go on the warpath could not have been worse. Still, I had to keep my head up, my focus clear, my priorities straight. I’d let Snyder worry about whether I would be going to jail. My ship had been hit by two icebergs, but that didn’t mean it would sink, at least not immediately. If I could somehow keep it afloat until after I produced this pivotal show, I’d go down with it a happy man.

That’s when two more icebergs hit: one due to my son’s maliciousness and the other thanks to my own stupidity. It was as if he sought to hammer nails in my coffin. Both pieces of bad news came from Snyder. That’s the problem when you’ve got a good attorney. You’re going to get the entire picture of what you’re up
against in every depressing detail. I wanted to know, of course, but it’s difficult to be friendly to the bearer of bad news?

How bad? It seemed that my son had gathered evidence that I had been at City Hall on two occasions the previous year. Now I faced three counts of violating the court order. Adding to the charges of my sister, I suddenly was in line to spend three and a half years in prison. I would have fainted but didn’t have the energy to do so again. It’s just as well because there was more bad news. Perhaps the worst yet. Snyder had gotten hold of the transcript of my earlier hearing before Judge Linda Turner in which I heard her tell me I could go to City Hall. But the transcript showed that’s not what she said. When my attorney during that hearing asked about it, as I had insisted, she effectively sidestepped the matter. I simply didn’t hear her correctly. Fresh from my meeting in the hallway with my son and his attorney where they had unambiguously stated that City Hall was a public building and that “of course” I had a right to go there as long as I stayed away from my son, I assumed that Judge Turner verified it. But she spoke in a quiet legalese voice that led me to misinterpret her. I now read her exact words in the transcript that Snyder put in front of me and I saw that she didn’t give me the permission I sought. My positive outlook, not to mention my less than perfect hearing, had led me astray.

I looked around for a lifeboat as the freezing waters gushed over me. “What about the conversation in the hallway?” I said weakly. Snyder said that she had called my son’s lawyer/colleague to ask about it. If the lawyer/colleague admitted to it, she conceivably could serve as a witness for me. That’s like asking one hungry shark to protect you from another. You’re dealing with slippery animals. Still Snyder had tried.

“And what did she say?” I asked Snyder as I stood in the icy, rising turbulence. Snyder wanted to throw me a life preserver but there was none to give. “She said she didn’t remember the conversation in the hallway. Said she didn’t even remember City Hall being mentioned to the judge. I guess your memory is better than hers,” said Snyder, “not to mention your honesty.”

We were up against a pack of wolves in sharkskin clothes. My chances of escape were getting slimmer by the minute. I knew the summer would be a challenging period as I sat with Snyder on that warm June day. I spoke to her as a patient who had just been given a diagnosis of two fatal conditions. There was no question that I was bound for the cemetery, jail. The only question: Which disease would put me there first and how quickly? I told Snyder that I must somehow keep my freedom until the end of the summer in order to
produce the Kennedy Center show. It was an opportunity that would not come again. An entire nation of prisoners and ex-prisoners were depending on me to help them put their best feet forward. No one could pull it off the way I could, I felt. It wasn’t a boast but simple acknowledgement that I had the background, experience, and motivation to do it. There was no way for me to find and train a replacement with less than 90 days remaining.

I must have presented a pathetic figure to Snyder. I could barely crawl but somehow I wanted to run and keep running the entire summer. Her prognosis for my condition and my state of mind was not good. I had two trials to face set for early July, both a long shot to win. The question didn’t seem so much whether I’d be spending the summer of 2008 in jail, but whether my incarceration would extend through the summers of 2009, 2010 and 2011. The euphoria I projected about the Kennedy Center opportunity, similar to a lottery winner, did not rub off on her.

When giving the analogy that I had won the lottery, I wasn’t far from the mark. When I spread the news about Gregg Henry giving my Foundation the Millennium Stage on Saturday night at the Kennedy Center, it brought us tremendous support. So much that I wouldn’t have to worry about financing the program this year. Even without my asking, the money was already being offered to me. Our long-time supporter, friend and sometime critic, Lloyd Rubin, agreed to pay the entire tab. And the tab would be much higher this year than last since I intended to pull out all the stops. Not only did I want to utilize a large cast, but I planned to produce a CD of the show. My goal—called a “wish list” in the language of the nonprofit world—was to take some of the performers and go into a studio on the weekend of the show. That way we’d emerge with a professional CD of what we had done.

When I spoke to Lloyd about backing the program, I was frank with him in every respect. Remember, he was not just a benefactor, but a brother. He knew about my strengths and shortcomings, my accomplishments and misses, my friends and enemies, the latter being principally my son and sister. But most importantly he knew I came from the same mold as he did. We had a firm resolve to pursue justice and the humane treatment of prisoners. It originated from our own experiences in prison. Lloyd knew how valuable a good presentation at the Kennedy Center would be. He didn’t want a lack of money to stand in the way of that happening. But he also knew that something else might stand in the way. Specifically, my two court battles that were coming soon. If either one knocked me out of the picture, the prospects for success at the
Kennedy Center wouldn’t be good. I couldn’t assure Lloyd that success would occur without me because I could not convince myself.

Still, I did. Not a day went by without my accomplishing something to make “From Prison to the Stage” the vibrant, entertaining and relevant show I had in mind. I reviewed plays and musicals being submitted by prisoners and ex-prisoners, auditioned performers and negotiated fees. Since Lloyd was still mulling over my situation at that point, I didn’t know whether I could pay what I was negotiated. Or even whether I would be around to pay it. I didn’t hide that from anyone. For better or worse, I believe that honesty is the best course. That’s been both a strength and an obstacle in my life. People sometimes want to hear falsehoods if they’re flattering or encouraging to them. I’m all for politeness and giving comfort to others. But unlike a conventional politician, I will not deceive. Some say that’s why I have not won public office despite my attempts to be elected. I’d rather be an honest public citizen than a dishonest public officer.

In being forthright in my dealings with people who offered their materials and talents for the Kennedy Center show, I made clear that I might not be around to see it happen. And if I wasn’t on the scene, the money might not be there to pay what I had promised. I told them that by the end of July, I would know for sure. After my two trials. They represented a pair of difficult gauntlets to get through, but I would do my best. The truth was that I was innocent of all charges. I was innocent because I didn’t know that I was violating stay away orders. Snyder read me the statutes about stay away orders. They said a person couldn’t be convicted if he felt he was not doing anything illegal. These statutes differed from most criminal laws that said ignorance of the law was no excuse. In my case, ignorance would be my chief defense. Was I intelligent enough to convince a judge of my stupidity? Two judges?

“I think you should seriously consider pleading guilty.” I couldn’t believe that Stephanie Snyder was saying this to me. We were sitting in her office at the Georgetown University Law Center. For the first time in that small office, I felt she had a small mind. Didn’t she know I was a fighter? A firm believer in the right of citizens to have a trial when they are accused of a crime. Why would I give up that right now when I had never done so before? Even in Florida when I was given a choice of no prison time if I pled guilty, I went to trial and received a 10-year sentence. When I arrived in prison to do those 10 years, I had no regrets about my decision or my principles underlying it. The police, my son, my sister or whoever
wanted to falsely accuse me of something could do that, but I would not be an accomplice to their wrongdoing.

No, I told Snyder, I’m a man, not an amoeba. Let me be a martyr if necessary, but we were going forward. She told me to think about it. Then she gave me a few more things to think about. For one, I wasn’t getting any younger; my shot at the Kennedy Center might not come again. Another point she made was that she was just talking about my pleading guilty to the matter of my emailing my sister. Snyder believed this was the least winnable. All that the prosecutor had to do was show the judge my emails and the Hawaii order preventing my contact with my sister for three years. The harmless nature of the communications might sway a jury but not a judge. And I wasn’t entitled to a jury since these were considered minor offenses. About my defense that I didn’t know the order was still in effect, it probably wouldn’t fly. The judge wouldn’t believe that when he heard that I had been to prison a few times already. Plus I didn’t look so stupid as to make such an ignorant mistake.

In the end it came down to this: if I pleaded guilty, I could perhaps put off sentencing until after the Kennedy Center. By the same token, maybe I could also put off the trial with my son since I was being so cooperative.

In a rare showing of common sense for me, I ended up pleading guilty to the case with my sister. But the prosecutor would not agree to delay sentencing. Nor would her colleague who was prosecuting me for my City Hall appearance delay the trial. Both were set for the summer. I imagine that once prosecutors have their knives sharpened, they’re afraid they might get dull if not quickly used. Or perhaps they believe that injustice delayed is injustice overcome. Who can fathom the minds of hungry animals?

Let me hasten to say that Snyder gave me no illusions of anything going my way. She told me to prepare for the worst. I entered Judge Lopez’s court on a day in July for sentencing with a prepared but curious mind. I say curious because this was a new experience for me. I always heard that judges are lenient when defendants plead guilty. It’s the equivalent of prostrating oneself before the king. His majesty is in a better mood and more inclined to mercy when he sees a subject doing that. The alternative is for someone to claim false arrest. That means the sovereign will have to decide whether the accused or his accusers are lying. He must hold a trial, which takes time. Someone has to pay for that time. Who else but the subject who chose to stand tall rather than bow humbly?

Despite my prostrating, Judge Lopez wasn’t in a good mood on sentencing day. It worsened when the prosecutor spoke. She told
him that I had been an annoying fly in my sister’s ointment ever since I had come out of prison five and a half years before. Why couldn’t I learn to live without my family? Didn’t I know that they had full and busy lives? I guess she was talking about their theft of my money. All robbers have busy lives. Spending the loot is time consuming. She concluded by saying that only if I were sent to jail for the maximum allowed by law would my sister feel protected and safe living in peace in Utah. Bear in mind that I have never been to Utah, have no intention of going, and would even have difficulty locating it on a map.

Then the prosecutor handed the angry-looking Judge Lopez a multi-page typed letter. My sister, more than two-thousand miles away, had prepared it. The letter, in all of its unbridled vehemence and unrestrained vindictiveness, formed a key part of the proceedings. It was her victim impact statement. In it, she called me a monster. It was a term that the now angry Judge Lopez would use twice in sentencing me before ordering me to jail.

But before he did that I was given a chance to speak. I had every word of my “sentencing speech” written so I would not vary from it. Here is an area, I am sad to say, in which I have considerable experience. Though such experience is largely useless. Generally, a judge has his or her mind made up by the day of sentencing. I could tell that Lopez already did. He knew exactly what punishment I would get. Still, I had to say something. What do you say at such a moment? Here’s what I have learned. Keep your remarks as short as possible. The best sentencing speech consists of three words: “I’m truly sorry.” To add anymore might add time to your sentence commensurate with the number of words you use. Unfortunately, I’m not smart enough or secure enough to take my own advice. But I’m getting better over time. Here is what I said:

“Your Honor, I’m 64 years old, old enough to know right from wrong, and I did wrong in this matter. I truly apologize to my sister and to this honorable court.” I added two or three more sentences, in one mentioning that I was now in therapy. I didn’t say I was there to try to figure out how one’s own son and sister could plunder and persecute their own flesh and blood so viciously.

Then the judge proclaimed my punishment. Before stating it, Judge Lopez said a number of vile things about me. In fact no judge I have ever stood before at sentencing, and I have been before many, has been so unkind in their remarks. Even the Florida judge who gave me 10 years did not use such harsh words. Not only did Judge Lopez use the word “monster” twice to describe me. One time he specifically referred to my actions toward my son and sister and the
other time he sketched a trail of terror that he attributed to me. He even referred in his seething words to one of his colleagues on the bench that I had sued. I wondered how he knew I had once sued a judge? But he seemed to know everything about me. By the time he got through describing me, I wondered how anyone could stand being in the same room with me. How could I even tolerate being in a room with myself?

When I got yanked out of the courtroom and taken to jail—like a dangerous and diseased animal—I lay on my cell bunk thinking about Judge Lopez’s excruciating and extensive remarks about me. It was very unusual since judge’s don’t like to put their personal feelings out in the open so boldly. Even in capital cases when judges sentence defendants to execution, they don’t lambaste them so fully and emotionally. It was so extreme in my case that I had to smile about it as I lay peacefully in jail with my hands under my head. I concluded that Judge Lopez was a seasoned and brilliant jurist.

He wisely didn’t try to fight my influential sister and son head on. They regarded me as a monster, so who was he to argue otherwise? A judge has a political job, appointed to the position in DC by no less than the President of the United States. A judge must give first priority to victims of crimes. The law exists to protect them, not the criminals who choose them as targets. And by my own admission—the first time I ever confessed to law-breaking behavior—I was a criminal. That’s why sentencing speeches by the convicted don’t add up to a hill of beans. What can a wild tiger say to make amends after it claws and chews up a bystander? Words are meaningless, an apology empty. Even if the tiger doesn’t growl in court, a judge can’t show any favoritism to it. That would upset the victims, who might in turn go after the judge’s robe by using public sentiment and political strings against him. Smart Judge Lopez had no doubt that my sister and son had many such strings through their important positions.

Having concluded his harangue against me, Judge Lopez pronounced his sentence. He prefaced it by saying he believed I was such a hardened individual that I would probably laugh at a long jail sentence. Sometimes a person is so bad that the correctional system can’t make a dent in him. And that was me.

What was going on, I wondered as I listened. What was the judge going to give me? The electric chair even though we’re only talking about emails here. Besides, executions were abolished in the District of Columbia. The judge ended his harangue by saying that he hoped that the therapy I was going through would set my spirit right
since he didn’t think jail would. Why waste the taxpayers’ money. He sentenced me to 10 days, of which I would do eight.
Chapter 10
Second Season at the Kennedy Center

Stephanie Snyder, my marvelous attorney about whom I no longer had the slightest misgivings, was smiling when she came to bid me goodbye. I was in the holding cell behind the courtroom of the compassionate, courageous and suddenly comprehensible Judge Jose Lopez. It was Friday. Snyder said happily, “See you on the outside next Friday.” Her tone was such that you would think I was going on an eight-day junket to the Bahamas, not to jail. But I knew it would in fact be a vacation; more preferable to me than the Caribbean. A tropical vacation would put me a long distance from the Kennedy Center. At the jail I would only be 40 blocks away. My planning for the second season would not lose its momentum with my being so close, and away for such a short time.

I wasn’t out of the woods, the D.C. Court System, just yet as I still had the trial with my son looming. But I was halfway there. During my jail vacation I would formulate my strategy for getting through the summer a free man. Whether it would work or not, only time would tell. If I were still standing by Labor Day weekend, I would be standing on the Millennium Stage.

I was set to go to trial before Judge Linda Turner on the City Hall charges in a few weeks. Perhaps she’d be as reasonable and resourceful as Judge Lopez. I was practically drunk with optimism.

Under the circumstances, jail was a good spot to be. I needed a place to work, not celebrate. And jail, whether I am writing, studying music, or laying out plans for a theatrical event I’m producing, is the most productive place imaginable. The first thing I worked on there was securing the financing for the Kennedy Center show. I drafted a letter to Lloyd Rubin. On the day I emerged from jail, I emailed it to him. In jail, it went through a few revisions. Remember, I had a few days there. The letter to Lloyd was an important communication that I wanted to be correct and convincing in every detail. I gave a lot of thought to a full budget, which I included.

I’m sure that Lloyd was already aware of and celebrating my short sentence with me. He was in touch with two of my colleagues at the Foundation, Resource Director Kevin Horrocks and Outreach Director Jahi Foster-Bey. Both of them were trusted associates fully committed to our cause. Like Lloyd and me, they’d been to prison.

In asking Lloyd to come through with the money for the program and CD recording I planned to make of it, I told him that we
already had all the people and plays we needed to put on a great Kennedy Center show. I also said that my main personal hurdle had been overcome with the short sentence I received. The trial remaining before me with my son would somehow be put off, even if I had to check myself into a hospital to do it. At my age and with the mini-strokes or fainting spells I had experienced, such a hospital stay would be a logical course of action. The medical facility I had in mind, if it came to this, was George Washington University Hospital. It’s the closest hospital to the Kennedy Center. I could hold all my production meetings there and even have performers come to my room to rehearse. On the day of the show, the last Saturday in August, Labor Day weekend, I could check myself out and walk to the Kennedy Center a short six blocks away. I already made this walk to check the distance. It took me exactly twelve minutes. I imagined I could cut down a minute or two of that time if I had to make the trip in a wheelchair. Whatever it took to get to the Kennedy Center that night, I would be there.

I didn’t go into all the details of my plan with Lloyd. But my assurances to him that I would personally oversee “From Prison to the Stage” were unwavering. It was also believable given the outcome of my sentencing with Judge Lopez. I was riding a streak of good fortune which would carry me, I believed, to the Kennedy Center.

My letter proved effective and Lloyd sent the money at once. He thought I could pull it off, and so did I. Anticipating Lloyd’s prompt assistance, I spent most of my week in jail doing other writing and planning in preparation for the show. Too bad other producers aren’t given the same opportunity to work in seclusion. They would be surprised at how much they can accomplish.

I exited jail on Friday, early in the morning. An order came for me to “pack up” after breakfast at 4 am. It didn’t take me long to get my things together. All I had were my writing and notes related to the show. By the time I left the jail, the hour was approaching 7 am. It took a while to leave because there are formalities that need to be addressed. You can’t leave in your orange inmate jumpsuit, for example, though some people would argue that it is perfect summer wear. It’s easy to put on and take off. Instead, you’re given upon release a grey, somewhat fashionable jogging outfit. The exception is a person who has been in jail for less than 15 days; a person like me. I was given my own clothes back, the ones I wore when I arrived at the jail from the courthouse. They had not yet been disposed of, which is the procedure after 15 days if an outside friend doesn’t pick them up. As I walked out, my civilian appearance prompted a jail officer who was reporting for work to assume that I was a volunteer
who came to the jail to help. One of my fellow exiting inmates corrected him. “He’s one of us, getting released today just like we are.” The prisoner who spoke did not use a mocking tone. In fact, I detected a note of pride in his voice. Leaving jail in my own clothes conferred status on me. It meant that my sentence had been brief. The inmate told as much to the officer. “He spent a week here. Guess why? His sister put him here because he emailed her.” Everyone shook their heads in disbelief. I only smiled, confirming that this was true. If only they knew the rest of the story, that my sister served as a director of United Way. I’m sure that they’d make a sarcastic comment about United Way waylaying family members while extending a hand to strangers.

With little more than 30 days left before the Kennedy Center show, I had to get all my ducks in a row. Financially, we would be in great shape, thanks to Lloyd Rubin coming through on one hundred percent. He trusted me enough by this time, and he knew that not a penny would be wasted. I had emerged from jail more committed than ever. He understood that and, as an ex-prisoner himself, respected it.

I had to stay focused so that the show would be a success. That meant clearing the road ahead of me. I braced myself to deal with potential obstacles. One of them was Robocop.

I didn’t know whether I’d see him again but it was a distinct possibility. When Judge Lopez sent me to jail for a week he also added a period of probation. That’s common when family members are at odds with each other. Judges want to keep their noses in family matters to make sure that nothing gets out of hand. I didn’t think I’d have a problem with Lopez while on probation as I had with the earlier maddening magistrate. For Judge Lopez to do more than yell at me again in order to make a good showing for my sister and son, I’d have to make a serious mistake. That’s something that I had no intention of doing. If there was any communication between me and those feckless family members, they would have to initiate it. And before I responded, I would make sure that both Judge Lopez and my therapist were at my side. I might be a forgiving father and brother, but I would no longer be a fool.

In reporting to the probation office, as I would now have to do on an occasional basis, I hoped that Robocop would no longer be there. It would be more than two years since I last saw him. Perhaps he had departed or rusted away. Or one of his wards had done more than sue him in court and had applied a hacksaw to his metallic head.

My luck held and he was nowhere to be seen. Whatever happened to him I don’t know but I was very pleased with the new
probation officer assigned to me, Elizabeth Raible. She was either the best or the worst of the lot. Either way I was happy. In saying that she might be the worst, my thought was that Robocop could have been the model for the agency. For all I know, they had him made to their specifications. He certainly wasn’t human. If I were in the market for a half cop, half bureaucrat, and 100% irritant, he would fit the ticket perfectly. And if I were determined to put as many probationers in jail as possible, I could not have asked for a better machine.

Raible on the other hand seemed to be made out of flesh and blood. There was a sense of fairness about her and a disarming politeness that enhanced her professionalism. She did her job but not at the expense of anyone she dealt with. As I got to know her, I could see that she had the potential of being a compassionate and understanding leader. While a probation officer can never become your friend, I didn’t see her as my enemy. Perhaps she’d even be an ally as Scan Suber had become. To be that, she’d have to get to know me better; to understand that I’m on the level. She could benefit by interacting with my son and my sister to understand that the opposite is true of them. Raible I believed could become a hero in her agency; the woman who exposed a great injustice committed on one of her probationers. Perhaps even get a nice promotion as Suber had gotten. It all depended on whether she could be tough enough. At the very least I thought she would support me, if only in the privacy of a voting booth, should I decide to once again to run for public office.

I invited Raible to the Kennedy Center show. The more people who attended the better. I had a large space to fill. I also let her know about my other playing engagements. Again, the goal in theater is to draw a crowd, no matter where they come from. As an ulterior motive, I wanted Raible to know that I had nothing to hide. She understood that I had been on the losing end of the battle with my son and sister, but perhaps if she got to know me, she would understand that it hadn’t been a fair fight. Not that I wanted her sympathy. But I could not predict what the future would hold with the conundrums and connivances of my son and sibling. At least Raible would know that I had an independent and fulfilling life, that I was happy to have buried the past and hoped that my offspring and sister would follow my example, both for my sake and for theirs. Raible took me up on my invitations, once accompanying me to church where I introduced her to friends, though her schedule didn’t permit her to stay for my playing.

As the Kennedy Center program got closer, I began to relax. It was coming together nicely. Five works would be performed, each
taking up half an hour of the two-and-a-half-hour show. For the most part, they were excerpts from larger works. All were written by prisoners or ex-prisoners. They resided in places ranging from Attica state prison in New York to my former domicile Petersburg federal prison in Virginia. The plays would be performed by a large and enthusiastic cast, including several male and female ex-prisoners. When I auditioned actors, I wanted to know about their criminal backgrounds. A reversal of most job interviews, if they had been to prison they would get extra points.

I had decided to use excerpts of works rather than full plays and musicals submitted because I didn’t want to put all my eggs in any one basket. When I attended the three-day Page-to-Stage Festival before I was a part of it, I found the audience receptive to some of the presentations but cool to others. Part of the problem was that people were not seeing finished productions. There were no costumes, scenery, orchestras, or other accoutrements for them to see and hear. A cynic might say that audiences were only getting what they paid for. And of course admission was free. But I saw it differently. The festival allowed attendees to see emerging or even finalized works in their barest form. They would get the words and the music without the distraction of theatrical embellishments. For a theater purist, it was a rare chance to experience the heart of drama, comedy and music. When Eddie Murphy was performing alone on an empty stage in front of a solitary microphone, audiences could fully assess and appreciate his tremendous talent. People who saw him in that stark setting weren’t surprised when he was later recruited by Hollywood to star in multi-million dollar movies.

Another example of the power of simplicity is found in the Beatles. Their early recordings and performances were bare-bone presentations. Audiences and producers sensed how far they could go in their creative output. Eventually, as stars, they took many months to record a single album that in the beginning they might complete in a weekend. Production values kept getting added, with terrific results and unparalleled popularity for the group. There is a coda to this story. In 2003, a new album of the Beatles appeared, some 30 years after the breakup of the band. Called Let It Be...Naked, it featured songs they had recorded stripped of the tracks that were added to create a full production. Gone were the strings, the overdubs and the special effects. This was the Beatles as they sounded on their own. For lovers of the group it had great charm and appeal. Others found it a curiosity, but still worth hearing.

Presentations at the Page-to-Stage Festival offer the same double-edged sword. As a producer, I needed to be true to the festival
by keeping the show simple. Yet I didn’t want my audience to walk away because of disappointment or boredom. Not even a small segment of them, if I could help it. That led to my decision to keep the program fast paced, using half hour portions of five works rather than longer parts of fewer plays. My plan had the additional benefit of allowing me to decide what portions to use. I knew I could not edit a playwright’s work without risking anger or assault. Nor did I want to take the time to do that since I had my own musical to revise and refine for the show. But I could influence or decide outrightly what portions would be presented. “I know our audience,” I would tell the writers, “and here’s the part of your work that I think will grab them the most.” They could either take it or leave it; participate or not participate.

Finally, by presenting segments of five different plays I could decide on the order of the presentations. If one had characteristics similar to another, I could make sure they were separated by another work to keep each one fresh. My focus is always on the audience. I want them to stay awake, to be moved, to get motivated, to take a greater interest in the plight of prisoners and of the potential of those who have been released.

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In choosing the works and the segments within them for the Kennedy Center, I wanted people come to me at the end of the evening to say that they had been both entertained and moved. But to hear their comments, I had to be there, not in jail. Imprisonment, I understood from previous experiences, was a real possibility in view of the trial I was set to undergo. Not with my Utah sister as my adversary, but with my younger, smarter, legally-trained and politically-connected D.C. son. I felt sick thinking about it. But not ill enough to go to the hospital as I once thought a possibility.

I arrived at the courthouse in mid-summer, the day of the trial in the courtroom of Judge Linda Turner. It was nice to see a familiar face, though I would have preferred Judge Lopez. I could stand his yelling but not the steel doors that Turner might close behind me and keep me behind. Not now when the Kennedy Center was just weeks away. Lopez’s sentences were reasonable, calculated in days, unlike other judges who counted them in months and years. “What happened to Lopez?” I asked my attorney, Stephanie Snyder. She explained that since Turner was the judge who had issued my son’s stay away order, she would decide if I had violated it.
As I waited for my case to be called, I listened to Judge Turner deal with other matters. I was shocked by what I heard. Or rather by what I didn’t hear. What I didn’t hear was just about everything she said. Turner was soft spoken to the point of almost whispering. That disturbed me, having last appeared before the melodramatic and fully audible, yet merciful, Lopez. A pattern was emerging; the louder the judge, the lower the sentence. In front of Turner, I could get life. More shocking was another realization. If Turner had spoken this softly when my son and I were in her courtroom the year before, it was no wonder that I had misunderstood her. When my attorney had sought her approval for my visits to City Hall, she had no doubt answered in the same whispering way. She seemed like a judge who was fed up with her job. Someone who could barely muster the energy to participate in proceedings. A judge who was fading away. Everyone in her courtroom had to strain to hear her talk. When she had given her equivocal response to my planned City Hall visits, I hadn’t strained enough.

She asked in a barely audible tone if all parties were ready to go to trial. My son, with his two colleagues, all three of them Assistant Attorney Generals bent on my destruction, seemed to be sharpening their daggers. One of the attorneys gleefully said that “the government is ready.” If the government were any more ready, the entire military establishment would be in the courtroom, their weapons of mass destruction pointed directly at me.

Snyder then spoke. In doing so she surprised everyone in the courtroom. Everyone but me. We had had a lengthy conversation the previous day in her office. It was an emergency meeting called at my request. I intended to dismiss her as my attorney in front of the judge, and I wanted to give Snyder as much advance warning as possible. My decision had been made two weeks before, but I couldn’t reach her to tell her. She was on her summer vacation. Hiking in woods, mountains or swamps. Somewhere. That bothered me a little since I thought she should be in a law library preparing for my trial. If anyone needed to do any hiking, I should have been the one. After all, my freedom to go anywhere might soon be limited.

But the thing that bothered me most about Snyder, which was the main reason for my decision to fire her, was her competence as a lawyer. I wasn’t used to such a high level of ability in a person representing me, and it irked me. In the past, the less capable lawyers at my side provided mediocre representation. So if I lost a trial, I could heap some of the blame on the lawyer. It was as if we’d both be sentenced to jail if we lost. That gave me some comfort, even though in reality, I would have to do the time alone. In Snyder’s case,
she would absolve herself of all guilt by giving me excellent representation.

When I explained all of this to Snyder in the emergency meeting I had arranged with her, I saw a certain expression appearing on her face. It conveyed a singular message to me: bullshit. She knew that I was panicking about the possibility of not being around to oversee my all-important second season at the Kennedy Center. Even panicking to the point of checking myself into a hospital, my original plan. But now I didn’t have to use that alternative. There were facts on my side that made pretending unnecessary. The question remained: Would Judge Turner believe them? I doubted she would, even though she did not know the reason for my possible lying. A delay in my trial would seem senseless in her mind. In fact, I could end up with a far worse judge, which in fact occurred. But I didn’t care as long as I could pull off the Kennedy Center caper. As I once told Snyder early in our preparations when delay was my main goal, “If we can only put off the trial until after the show, I’d happily do five years in prison.” God seemed to have heard that as future events would reveal. Sometimes, you have to be careful what you pray for. When I mentioned five years I didn’t think it was a remote possibility. I was charged with three counts by my son, each carrying a maximum of six months in jail. Do the math: a total of one and a half years, not five. But with God, anything is possible.

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“Mr. Sobin has a problem with my continuing to represent him,” said Stephanie Snyder with an expression of surprise on her face. While addressing Judge Turner, the words fell heavily on everyone in the courtroom. Everybody frowned. Including me, though I had no reason to. Such is the power of peer pressure.

To understand the full impact of Snyder’s remark, consider the setting. A courtroom is like a surgical theater. Or perhaps even a regular theater with everyone in the audience waiting for show time! I prefer the analogy of a hospital theater where surgery is about to begin. But whether courtroom or medical arena, no matter how you slice it, it’s still theater.

When a patient calls off an operation at the last moment, there’s bound to be disappointment. The surgical table has been prepared, the scalpels have been honed, the doctors and nurses are psychologically conditioned to see blood. A lot of it. Then all of a sudden, the patient sits up and says no way. He’s not comfortable with the operating team. As the patient—the star in this bloody
theater, where life and death hang in the balance—he has a right to change his mind. So everyone frowns. Then they all look with burning eyes at the anesthetist. Why hadn’t she done her job better to render the patient unconscious? Then the operation could have proceeded as the patient lay in silence. The patient is not supposed to have a say in these matters, particularly at this late stage. If only the surgery could have gone forward, the team would shake hands when finished and get rid of the patient, either sending him off to recuperate or calling the morgue to receive him.

Snyder was the closest thing in the courtroom to an anesthetist. So she was the one that Turner angrily summoned to her bench. At least I think Turner was angry. Her words were too soft for my 64-year-old ears that I can’t be sure. But I detected it in her eyes. Snyder motioned me to come along. One of my son’s prosecutor friends also joined us.

Three feet away from Turner, I could finally hear her, but barely. “What seems to be the problem, Mr. Sobin?” I told the judge that I was unhappy with Snyder and wanted to hire another attorney.

Turner was thorough in her questioning of me about this last minute turn of events. Fortunately, I had heard all her questions before so I was prepared with answers, right down to the smallest detail. An attorney friend, though not a criminal lawyer, had put me through a sample grilling earlier in the week.

I won’t go into much detail here. That would require an entire book in itself. I will say that at one point in our dialogue, Judge Turner said, “Don’t you know that Ms. Snyder is at the top of the feeding chain among attorneys?” I said I did know, avoiding the temptation to say that I was more of a bottom feeder myself. That’s what happens when you spend 10½ years in prison, followed by another 1½ years in a homeless shelter. Instead, I reverted to the theme I had used throughout this bench conference so far. “Yes, I think highly of her, but we just don’t see eye to eye on what the strategy for my trial should be.”

Turner had to tread carefully at this point. When it comes to a defendant’s trial strategy, she can’t ask too much. Not with the prosecutor sniffing at my throat. If I revealed to him, for example, that part of my strategy at the trial was to wear garlic around my neck to keep his vampire witnesses at a distance, he could revert to poison dart throwers. Turner said, “What’s this case about anyway?” I knew why she was asking and I could not have been more pleased. She was about to render a decision of my guilt or innocence. Not out loud, as if she could announce anything out loud. But in her own mind. If after hearing the facts of the case she decided that I was obviously guilty,
she would conclude that I was getting rid of my top-feeding lawyer so I could delay my feeding on jail food. On the other hand, if she saw my defense as being strong, she would think that my illogical decision for disposing of Snyder was as sincere as it was stupid.

I presented the case to Turner with conciseness yet completeness; it wasn’t very complex. How I had gone to City Hall on a few occasions because I was on the witness list to testify at a city council hearing there. I had not thought that the stay away order that my son had requested and that she had granted the year before, applied to all of City Hall, only to his office there. “Your Honor,” I said when I saw that I had her ear and quite possibility her sympathy, “I didn’t see him or attempt to see him while I was there.” I could almost feel a halo starting to form atop my head. Or at least I sensed that Turner was looking for one.

The entire case had been presented to her. It was that simple and straightforward. The prosecutor standing next to me didn’t attempt to alter the facts or correct me in any way. He couldn’t. There was nothing I said that needed correcting. If only trials could be conducted with such purity. That isn’t possible considering all the training lawyers have to muddy the waters. Maybe that’s what Shakespeare had in mind when he wrote that in an ideal society, “the first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.” For my part, I would spare Stephanie Snyder. And of course, my son. I might give him life, but I’m a firm opponent of the death penalty.

“If,” Judge Turner said in a hopeful way, her eyes twinkling and her voice even lower than usual and barely audible despite my close proximity to her, “I agree to dismiss Ms. Snyder, do you have another attorney to represent you?” It was a trick question, but one I had anticipated, thanks to the briefing my friend had given me. “Yes, I do,” I said without hesitation, hoping that she would not make me prove it. But she did. In a way that was as shrewd as it was spectacular. “In that event,” she said, “I want your new attorney here in my courtroom within the hour.”

Quicksand was starting to form around me and I was sinking quickly. How could I retain an attorney in one hour? There wasn’t even enough time for me to rob a bank so that I could pay him or her a retainer fee. But I knew at this point that I could not retrace my steps and cave in. If I agreed to a trial with Snyder representing me now, the judge would find me hard to stomach during the proceedings. Whatever I said would be taken with a grain of salt, maybe an entire shaker. With my credibility in question, I’d be pegged before I opened my mouth as a liar, cheater, coward, criminal and quite possibly a bad father. Turner would make sure I spent the
night in jail. Even if the trial wasn’t concluded in a day, she would find a way. And probably keep me there for the next year and a half.

When I told Judge Turner that I had an attorney, I wasn’t exactly fibbing. I knew who I wanted to represent me. He had even offered to do so. But that was several months before at the time that my arrest at City Hall occurred. I didn’t think I could afford him. Nor did I believe that he’d do as thorough a job as Snyder and her Georgetown University Law Center team. For them I wasn’t just a client but a legal experiment. Snyder had been quick to grasp the First Amendment implications of my case. If a Washington citizen couldn’t go to City Hall to speak at a public hearing to which he had been invited to testify, where could he go? You’d expect an arrest like mine to occur in a developing country or in a dictatorship, but not in a two-hundred-year old democracy. Suppose the mayor had gotten a stay away order against an adversary who had sued him, then engineered that person’s arrest when he came to City Hall to speak at a hearing at the invitation of a council member. The mayor would lose his job in a quick recall election. Then he’d either be run out of the city or committed to St. Elizabeth’s Hospital for the insane.

Snyder had been looking forward to our day in court to argue that a stay away order cannot take precedence over the United States Constitution. But now I had to continue my pursuit of justice with another lawyer. There was simply no other way to get the trial I wanted, or when I wanted it.

After Judge Turner had ordered me to get my new lawyer into her courtroom, I went into the hallway to use my cell phone. I called James Q. Butler, an attorney who insisted that his middle initial, if not his full middle name of Quincy, always be used. Try to call him Jim instead of James and you could end up an ex-client. His pluses were many. Butler spoke well and dressed for success. He also had a quick grasp of my case when I spoke to him about it shortly after my arrest. At the time I was giving him advice on how to reach prisoners who might be in need of his legal services. Part of Butler’s diversified practice is post-conviction appellate work. If you’re not a lawyer or have never been an inmate, you probably don’t know what that is. Prisoners dream about a triumphant post-conviction proceeding. A victory means they can go home.

I was already home and wanted to retain Butler to help me stay there, at least until after Labor Day. If we lost at that point, I could at least write about the Kennedy Center show in jail. With only a few weeks away, the show and my participation in it would depend on what Butler said when he answered his phone after I dialed his number in the court hallway.
He didn’t answer. He wasn’t there. In fact he was hundreds of miles away taking a deposition in New York City. “I’m afraid that he can’t be disturbed,” his secretary told me. I understood. A deposition is like a trial, albeit one taking place in a lawyer’s office. In some ways, it is more important than a trial. Key witnesses are put on record in sworn testimony. Depending on what they say, trials might become unnecessary. For example, if an out-of-court settlement can be reached.

“That’s critical I speak to him,” I told her. “I’m in a situation that is almost as bad as life and death.” I explained in detail, holding nothing back. Perhaps even exaggerating a bit. I know I did that in stating Butler’s commitment to represent me to her. Hopefully he’d remember our conversation the same way. After all, he was an ambitious attorney and this could be a high profile case for him. Even if he didn’t get his full normal fee, it might bring in other clients. Hopefully his representing me wouldn’t be all about money. If that were the case, I wouldn’t have much of a chance getting him. His well-tailored clothes didn’t come from the Salvation Army. I could see how juries would be impressed. His image as a strong advocate and a winner would be re-enforced when he opened his mouth since he spoke so well. Would Judge Turner be similarly won over? I might never find out if I couldn’t get him into her courtroom, and quickly.

The next hour was tense. Butler, through his secretary, said that he would represent me. Great! But it would be impossible for him to come into Turner’s courtroom anytime soon. I reported this to Snyder and Turner. The judge wasn’t happy. As a compromise she said, “I at least want to talk to Mr. Butler on the phone to confirm first-hand that he will be your attorney.”

For the next hour a war of wills waged between Butler and Turner, with my freedom hanging in the balance. Butler told his secretary to tell me and the judge that he would not interrupt his deposition to talk to her. No way. Turner was just as firm in her insistence that she speak with him. As I shifted my head back and forth between these battling giants, from Turner’s bench to Butler’s secretary on my cell phone, it seemed that my trial had already begun. I predicted, with at least partial accuracy, that if Butler could win this contest, he could win anything.

Finally, Judge Turner relented. She even made a joke about the standoff, noting that James Q. Butler was flying so high in New York legal circles that he didn’t have time to speak to a lowly D.C. Superior Court judge. What else could she do but be a gracious loser? She probably suspected that if I were so unintelligent as to let
top-flight Stephanie Snyder who was familiar with my case go as my attorney, I would be dumb enough to represent myself if she denied me Butler. In fact, that had been my plan. Or at least to threaten to represent myself. The last thing she wanted was her courtroom to be turned into a circus starring Dennis the Clown.

On the way out of the courthouse with Snyder, I got more good news. Snyder told me that when I had gone into the hallway to make my desperate calls to Butler’s secretary, the judge said to her and the prosecutor, “I think Mr. Sobin has a defense here.” Her comment meant that, having heard the facts of the case, she believed me to be innocent. First impressions of a judge are very important. They were critical in my case where there would be no jury to judge me. Thinking back on that day of good fortune, I am reminded of a man who won free passage on a luxury ocean liner. But instead of clear sailing, he found himself on the deck of the Titanic.

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With busy James Q. Butler in the driver’s seat, I felt that my trial would be put off for some time; and quite likely won. But whether we triumphed or went down in icy waters, it would be anticlimactic. My real challenge was to put on a show at the Kennedy Center that no one would soon forget. People might forget about me if I weren’t around, but I wanted the words and the music that they heard from the Millennium Stage during the “From Prison to the Stage” program to remain in their minds and hearts forever.

I devoted myself fully to final preparations for the show. Many talented and dedicated people assisted me. Together, we presented the two-and-a-half-hour program, bringing tears, laughter, hope and love to a packed, standing-room-only audience. The expectations of the attendees were high. After all, it was the Kennedy Center and our second show there. Many had missed the first one through no fault of their own. When they had arrived they’d been turned away because of a lack of space. They waited an entire year to see what the excitement was all about. So I had to deliver. Thanks to Butler, Snyder and Turner, the path was clear for me to do so.

Showtime was drawing near. My playwrights and performers were converging on Washington from different places, all with a singular, shared purpose. As if we were linked together to pull off the heist of the century. Our goal was not to grab money but to steal hearts. We had the larcenous background for it, though our focus now was on something legal. There were plenty of ways to make
money but relatively few to get the applause we sought. And not just any clapping, but Kennedy Center applause.

The playwrights whose work were presented—Lamont Carey, Joseph Briggs, Sheldon Land, Ramone Fernandez, Lee Amirault and me—were all ex-prisoners. We approached the show as a conspiratorial enterprise. That meant using considerable caution and rehearsing as must as possible. Many of us had landed in prison because we had not attended to small details in the past. We vowed that wouldn’t happen again. Failure at the Kennedy Center could mean going to jail for some of us. We had probation officers, parole officers and other officers watching and waiting. If we proved ourselves worthy at the Kennedy Center, we could sway their view in our favor. Very important. It meant that if we ran into trouble in the future, such as missing probation appointments or even getting accused of new crimes, they might give us the benefit of the doubt.

For my part, I tried to anticipate all the things that could go wrong and to do what I could to prevent them. But some matters were beyond my control, particularly when it came to dealing with the Kennedy Center. Gregg Henry and his staff were in charge. Suppose they got cold feet about us at the last minute? Something we did wrong but didn’t know about? I had once thought that our first season was error-free, but that wasn’t the case. Mistakes were made due to my lack of experience, and I had been called on the carpet for it. Perhaps this year the carpet would be pulled out from under me. It had been a hectic summer with several court appearances and my week-long stay in jail. How could I have been 100% focused on the Kennedy Center? Yet I should have been. I didn’t think there were any loose ends to tie up, but I might be wrong. There was so much to do and so little time to do it.

I had been lucky so far in putting the pieces together for the show. Would they remain in place for the Labor Day weekend performance? Would my luck hold out? It had been luck that Gregg Henry had given us another opportunity to do right this year. He would have been generous had he given us a same small space as before. But he chose to put his confidence in us and allow us to present “From Prison to the Stage” on the much sought after Millennium Stage. Did my use of Max Woodward’s name play a role in that? It had been a desperate act on my part, I realized now, one that could have landed me in hot water.

Suddenly a shiver came over me. I could still get in trouble over it. All Gregg Henry had to do was run into Max Woodward and mention my name. “I understand that Dennis Sobin is a friend of yours. We’re putting a lot of trust in him this year by giving him and
his Foundation the Millennium Stage at the Page-to-the-Stage Festival."

How would Woodward respond? He wouldn’t be happy, that much I felt certain. "Sobin? Sobin? Oh yes, now I remember. You’re kidding! He said I was his friend? I wrote him one time—in the last century! Must have been 15 or 20 years ago. One letter and that was it. He’s written me a few times since. I don’t know why. I figured he probably wanted something, and now you tell me that you’ve given him the Millennium Stage after he mentioned my name? That’s outrageous! Call him immediately and get it back. We don’t play games here at the Kennedy Center, we play music!"

Maybe Woodward would be so angry that he would call me himself.

And indeed, a week before our scheduled show, the call I feared came. It was for me. Max Woodward on the line.

Identifying myself after learning that he was the caller, I felt I was participating in a séance. Speaking to a long-deceased brother. In fact I had such a brother. He was born prematurely and didn’t survive birth. He would have been a year younger than I. My parents took it hard. They wanted their children close in age, feeling that two children would be better companions to each other if only a small age gap existed between them.

Had I contributed to his death in any way? I realize I was only a year old at the time, but perhaps I was a difficult baby. One who consumed an inordinate amount of my mother’s energy? So much so that she could not maintain a full-term pregnancy with me on her hands. Under those circumstances I could expect my departed brother to be angry at me. If he could get in touch with me somehow, say with a telephone call as Woodward was now doing, how would he express his anger? What defense would I have? I’d try to explain myself. That I was just a baby with an infant’s demands. Simply trying to make my own way in the world. Maybe I wouldn’t try to explain at all. Only apologize. Take my lumps. Promise to do better if ever given another opportunity. If only he’d forgive me.

The voice on the other end of the phone did not have a echo as I would have expected coming from the other world. Whether from heaven or the high offices of the Kennedy Center, I did not know the voice, though the name was familiar. Max Woodward barely got it out of his mouth when my nervousness and anxiety took over. I didn’t make any assumptions about the purpose of his call. Instead I let my natural gregariousness take over. The same talkativeness that had gotten me in so much trouble with my son’s lawyers. Still I talked. About how grateful I was that he had written me while I was in
prison. That even though it was only one letter, it had played an important role in my life. Helping to inspire me to start the Foundation. Motivating me to seek my fortune at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. His Kennedy Center. Which I found to be perfect in every way. How could I ever thank him enough for putting this juggernaut of a dream in motion?

I must have sounded ridiculous as I gushed out those words and more. Yet, they were true. Woodward’s lone stone had changed the nature of my placid pond. Cast into the glassy water, it had created ripples that reached and gently touched the furthest recesses of my life. It turned the sedate waters of my incarcerated existence into an active and artistic stream shimmering with colors and absorbing all the world had to offer. Even in the remote wilderness of prison, where beauty can be illusive. A single stone, cast by a solitary patron of the arts who had remarkable courage and confidence in the human spirit.

Max Woodward finally spoke. He said that he hoped he wasn’t calling me at a bad time, knowing how busy I must be preparing for the Kennedy Center event. Nonetheless, he wanted me to know how much he admired all that I had accomplished. He had been following my progress, and thought that my achievements had been substantial. He regretted that he was going to be away for Labor Day and therefore could not accept my kind invitation to be at the show. It would be very good, he knew, and he wished me the best of luck. Take care.

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He did not tell me to break a leg. Otherwise I might have followed his advice literally and then sent him a snapshot of the fractured limb to let him know how I complied with his suggestion. I was that taken with his words.

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The entire week before “From Prison to the Stage” was presented at the Kennedy Center’s Page-to-the-Stage Festival, I was devoted to rehearsals. Of the five works that were to be performed, I oversaw the rehearsals of two of them. For the others, I was in close contact with the playwrights who were set to produce their works with casts they had assembled. I cooperated in every way: meetings, site visits to the Millennium Stage, calls and emails.
Except for rehearsing in the final week there was little else to do. The printed program had been prepared, specifications had been given to the Kennedy Center for microphone placements and other equipment needs, and all other details worked out.

Shelton Land, playwright and ex-prisoner, came with his cast from Richmond, Virginia. They put on a half hour of his play Road 2 Redemption about an imprisoned mother returning home to confront her family; in particular, her angry son. It touched more than one nerve in me, which was a primary reason I secured this piece for the program. As the story of missed opportunities and miscommunication in the family unfolded on the Kennedy Center stage, I could see that our large audience was as affected emotionally as I was. Shelton and his fine performers captured the essence of two worlds colliding, one occupied by the free and responsibility-laden, the other by the incarcerated and responsibility-free. They were suddenly together in the same space trying hard to repair damage and restore normalcy, using words that did not always fall on receptive ears, words that had different connotations in the two worlds. Can love save such a family from turning on itself and self-destructing? That’s the challenge for any family when a member has been exiled for a lengthy period through incarceration. Shelton’s play shed light on the issues spectacularly.

Joseph Briggs of Washington, DC, used his half hour to present a one-man show that took the audience inside prison. I had shared cells with men like Joe, an actor-writer who aptly used the stage name of One Wise African. He’s as riveting in his discourse as a Paul Harvey or a Barrack Obama, and as insightful. At the Kennedy Center, Joe related tales of prison hardships and harrowing moments that he experienced on the inside. He told of prisoners’ hopes and aspirations, of their fantasies and dreams, of the expectations of a world that would not be kind to them. What made his presentation all the more effective was the way he dressed for the performance. Joe wore a suit, tie and vest that made him look like a diplomat; a person of distinction who could command the respect of anyone. Yet his previous abodes had not been embassies but prisons, where human dignity is not recognized, where inmates are treated no better than animals in a zoo, in fact worse because public scrutiny is absent. Joseph Briggs exposed in his play what few people get to see. In so doing he captivated even the most ambivalent onlookers.

Also hailing from Washington, DC, Lamont Carey utilized the largest cast of any of the playwrights featured in our Kennedy Center program—almost 30 actors and actresses, including an elderly man and a young boy. Lamont had presented a one-man show at the
first year’s “From Prison to the Stage” program at the Kennedy Center. He was a big help to me during that initial experimental phase. In fact the name “From Prison to the Stage” was his suggestion, replacing an earlier name that lacked descriptive and inspirational qualities.

As I began planning the second season of our Kennedy Center program, I knew I wanted to include Lamont. But I needed something more than another one-person play to diversify the show. Fortunately, he had been developing a new TV series. I asked him to do a half-hour adaptation of it for “From Prison to the Stage.” He agreed and came up with an extraordinarily well-crafted presentation. Largely autobiographical, it dealt with the power of peer pressure to transform an innocent youth into a business tycoon in an impoverished neighborhood where the principle business is the drug trade. The play’s main character learns how to deal with rivals, the police and assorted other challenges and characters in his community. Finally, and inevitably, he goes to prison, which appears to be a microcosm of his neighborhood. There he meets his early role model. Now he judges the man as flesh and blood rather than the super-hero he once imagined. It is a powerful coming of age tale.

From New York came award-winning playwright and ex-Attica prisoner, Ramone “Ringo” Fernandez. The half hour segment of one of his plays that we presented was set entirely in prison and focused on a specific, emotionally draining occurrence. One all too common to long-term inmates, unfortunately. In his tale, a prisoner gets a much anticipated letter from his girlfriend. But it’s not the loving greeting and psychological support he expects. Instead, she says she’s quitting him. Her letter, in which she pulls no punches, details the reasons. She knows his faults and delineates them. She believes he’s hopeless and declares that her wait for him is over.

As with Shelton Land’s play, the Fernandez piece hit close to home for me and other ex-prisoners. I saw the pattern first-hand. A loved one on the outside gets disillusioned with his or her own life, then finds a scapegoat in the friend, lover or family member in prison. It’s easy to dump on a person who can’t defend himself. Perhaps that’s why prisons have grown so popular and exist in such large numbers. They serve a useful purpose. Not to protect society, considering only a small percentage of people in prison have violent backgrounds. Rather, to serve as modern-day human sacrifices.

One would expect Ringo’s play to be sad, his prison character depressed and hopeless. But that is not the case at all. Ringo draws from his years of prison experience to show that inmates can rise to any challenge. That they have strengths and resources on the inside
that few outsiders can imagine. In the play the maligned inmate reads the dreadful letter he has received to others. He then composes an answer, weighing every word and thought that is applicable to his and her situation. He doesn’t do this alone but is surrounded by prison friends who have either gone through the same back-stabbing or expect to. Together, syllable by syllable, sentence by sentence, they create a powerful and human response. Portions of the completed letter are cunning, parts of it are hilarious, all of it is perceptive.

I didn’t ask Ringo whether his play was autobiographical. Perhaps this is how he got his start in prison as a writer and a poet. It occurred to me that I didn’t get fully serious about my music and writing until the people closest to me on the outside pierced my heart with similar words of hate and abandonment. Had I not pursued creative expression, I might have become a hardened criminal. I knew I needed to do something to escape the feelings of self-loathing and worthlessness that outsiders tried to foster in me. If not for “art” and the new vistas it opened for me, I might have fallen into the trap of becoming the lowlife they called me. In social science, such a transition is called a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Ringo’s play was a challenge to present because we lost our star and its producer at the last moment. One and the same person, Ringo Fernandez himself. He had called me from his home in New York a week before the show. Said he had caught a bug, literally. He described it as a “ghetto bug.” Something had bitten him and his leg was now badly infected. He put off getting help for it, hoping it would clear up on its own. But it didn’t. When he finally went to a hospital emergency room, the doctors said he had arrived just in time. If it had not been treated then, he could have died. He still wasn’t out of the woods, or the ghetto. He’d been advised not to travel if he didn’t want to chance losing a leg or his life.

I responded with more sensitivity for his play than sympathy for the playwright. The play would go on in his absence, I said. He could keep the travel money I had sent him, plus he’d get his promised fee for our use of the play. A true artist, Ringo said that wasn’t good enough. The play could not be done without him. He was the main character. That and his direction of the supporting cast, which I had hired and were waiting to rehearse with him, made his participation essential. I wasn’t buying it. Or rather I had already bought the play. With or without Ringo, it would be performed.

We were about to hang up on each other when he relented. He promised to arrive in Washington the next day, dead or alive. I said we’d see him at our rehearsal space, or a funeral parlor. I tried to cheer him by saying that we had good doctors in D.C. I may have
even sung him a portion of Irving Berlin’s song about the preeminence of theater work over other endeavors. “There’s no business like show business, there’s no business I know...Let’s get on with the show.”

Good news came the next day. Ringo called from Washington. He had made the trip as promised and arrived in one piece. But there was also bad news. He was calling from a local hospital, waiting to see a doctor. He couldn’t walk. I inquired whether he had his own room. His comfort was not on my mind. Irving Berlin’s song was. If he had his own space, I could transport the five-member cast there and we could rehearse in his presence. Ringo said he hadn’t even been admitted and hoped he wouldn’t be. He’d call me back as soon as he saw a doctor.

Hours passed as I attended to other matters. There was more than enough to fill my time as I perfected the art of juggling. I did everything during those final days before the show, with the exception of sleeping. No word from Ringo as the sun descended and the stars climbed in the sky. I would wait until midnight for his call. Then I would pronounce him theatrically dead, and proceed without him.

The call came. Too late to arrange a rehearsal that day. But at least he had gotten out of the hospital and was now in the home of a D.C. friend. That’s where he had planned to stay while in the area. I said we’d be there the next day. The entire cast. Besides rehearsing with him, I wanted to ascertain his condition first hand. For all I knew, he could be having a drug problem and be in otherwise perfect health; but impossible to rely upon. I’ve dealt with that situation before. A person with a drug addiction is worthless in any responsible position. If Ringo had to have a leg removed, both legs removed, all limbs taken, he at least could be counted upon to think clearly and make decisions if he were drug free.

The cast piled into a car and arrived at his doorstep the next day. He was limping. Then he showed it to all of us. The leg was in very bad shape. I should have brought candy as a get well gift. A giant box.

Rehearsing began shortly thereafter. But first a major decision had to be made, something I had debated with the cast. Ringo’s play contained a good deal of raw language. Not unusual for prison but perhaps a little rough for the multi-age audience we would likely have. Most of the players wanted to tone down the language but I protested on two grounds. I am against censorship and certainly against unilaterally altering a playwright’s work. Ringo surprised me by readily going along with the suggestions of the cast. He was
acting more like a good citizen than a fiercely defensive artist. Maybe he was on drugs after all.

The day before the show arrived, Ringo told me that his doctor absolutely forbid him from going to the Kennedy Center to participate. I wasn’t surprised after seeing his leg. It looked more than infected but downright explosive. My back-up plan would have to go into effect, with Ringo’s understudy taking his role. That person had played another part in his play so I recruited the outreach director of the Prison Art Gallery, Jahi Foster-Bey, to join the cast and fill in for the smaller part. He was a big hit despite lacking acting experience. I guess his time in prison toughened him for any role. Stage fright? After facing tough people in prison on and off the staff, no way!

With this makeshift arrangement to perform Ringo’s play, only one thing went wrong. The cast performed it with all of the provocative words intact. I’m not sure how that happened, but I was pleased with the results. Maybe the cast got into character and did what their hearts and mouths dictated. They apologized later but I congratulated them. That’s the way it truly is in prison. The public could either like it or stop putting so many people there.

The play that I spent the most time with was the musical that Lee Amirault and I wrote when we were inmates together in the same prison, FCI Petersburg. As the world’s first Holocaust musical, it was only fitting that it should make its debut at the Kennedy Center. A Stich in Time, the true story of a Jewish tailor who survives the Holocaust due to his personal stamina and professional skills, got a half hour on stage like the other works. No more and no less, in keeping with the principle of fairness. The last thing I wanted to do was show favoritism to anyone, including myself. Besides, with funder and executive producer Lloyd Rubin’s money and encouragement, I was able to make a cast recording of the entire musical. The dream that Lee and I had in prison of making an impact in the world of theater and human consciousness was being realized.

We did the cast recording in first class style all the way. The players assembled at the legendary Inner Ear Studios in Virginia where the studio’s owner and my longtime friend Don Zientara greeted us. A year had passed since he had set up his sound system at the first “From Prison to the Stage” show at the Kennedy Center, only to have to take it down at the insistence of Gregg Henry’s staff. Though it hadn’t been used, it served a useful purpose; demonstrating that we had access to top people like Zientara. It helped establish our credibility and commitment to artistic excellence, smoothing the way for the second season.
The entire show at the Kennedy Center went smoothly and we received many compliments afterward. There were also autograph signings and numerous pictures taken of the production and players. I didn’t emcee the show. That honor fell on lawyer James Q. Butler, whom you have already met. He will reappear in the next chapter as he performs on the stage of D.C. Superior Court, attempting at my trial to prevent the long arm of the law, in the form of my son and his Attorney General colleagues, from choking me.

My fate in that minor venue didn’t matter now. I had scored a triumph at the Kennedy Center. The success of what prisoners and ex-prisoners could accomplish had been established. A month after “From Prison to the Stage” I was still being complimented by ushers at the Kennedy Center when I attended other productions there. They’re the toughest of all audiences since they see so much, holding out praise for only the best.

Just in case my upcoming trial in October went badly, I took the occasion of the Kennedy Center show to do my swan song. I opened the show with it, using the beautiful Steinway grand piano that the center provided us. My song was a reprise of the Star Spangled Banner, though this time I wouldn’t be pulled into jail after performing it as I had at my first sentencing. I wore the jumpsuit in which I was released from jail after that initial incarceration. That was before the jail started issuing street clothes to departing inmates. At the Kennedy Center, I added to the effect by playing while wearing handcuffs. They were put on by an “officer” hovering over me. The fierce-looking cop was superbly played by Kevin Horrocks, resource director of the Prison Arts Gallery, and himself a musician and ex-prisoner. In his costume and dark sunglasses, he inadvertently scared some of my friends.
Chapter 11

*Returning to Jail and More Frontiers to Explore*

As good as my attorney James Q. Butler was, he had a high hurdle to jump. In fact, three of them since I was charged with violating my son’s stay away order by going to City Hall on three occasions. The optimism I once felt had largely disappeared when I received a ruling from the D.C. Court of Appeals about my disastrous probation revocation hearing two years earlier. As if their long delay wasn’t depressing enough, their decision was even more alarming. They said that even if the judge had made a mistake in sending me back to jail for speaking to my son’s attorney at his instigation, they would not intervene. Why? Because I had already completed my time. This form of justice seemed to have been authored by George Orwell, whose nightmarish novels introduced the term “double think.” The term refers to an upside-down form of logic that makes no sense whatsoever.

The D.C. Appeals Court said, in essence, that because it had delayed its ruling for so long, the harm of injustice to me had already been done. Therefore, they wouldn’t be ruling on it, or even calling it injustice. Can you imagine historians saying that they can’t call the Holocaust, Stalin or the World Trade Center attacks evil because the harm of these events is over? They’d be roasted. But there’s no way to do the equivalent to D.C.’s highest court. My faith in the legal system plummeted.

What bothered me most about the decision was that it emboldened D.C. Superior Court judges to do more wrong. If the damage they caused by bad decisions didn’t last more then two years, they could do as they pleased. Two years is the time it takes for an appeal to be heard in DC. At my upcoming trial, I faced a year and a half in jail.

While I still had confidence in Judge Linda Turner after she told my previous attorney Stephanie Snyder that I “had a defense.” I knew enough, finally, not to trust my optimism. Judges can change their minds; or there might be a rotation of magistrates that would take her out of the picture entirely. Then who? Judge Deaf Dog? He was about as compassionate as Attila the Hun, wielding his gavel as destructively and indiscriminately as any truncheon.

I approached the trial as I would going through a dangerous medical procedure where my chance of survival was 50/50 or less.
That meant getting all my affairs in order, perhaps even having one. It might be awhile before I lived a normal heterosexual life again. Detailed instructions were left with friends and colleagues about what to do in my absence. Advice and suggestions on how projects in which I was involved be handled. Money matters delegated.

On the performance front, I was careful about the guitar playing dates I accepted. There were long-term playing commitments previously made. They would have to be cancelled if I weren’t available, including an engagement at a convention sponsored by a national public defenders association. The lawyers would understand since their clients often went to jail for the smallest of infractions. Hopefully they’d have enough time to get another performing artist. I was also set to perform at a fundraising event for the Victoria Woodhull Foundation, an organization that seeks sexual enlightenment and personal freedoms without the heavy hand of government interference. I’d known some of its members from the 1970’s and 80’s when I was handing out condoms to hookers, clean needles to junkies, and advice to police and politicians who would rather see people die of AIDS or rot in jail before they’d admit to the futility of legislating morality. My Victoria Woodhull friends had been used to seeing me arrested and put in jail frequently back then for ruffling feathers, though they also sometimes saw me on Oprah Winfrey and other national media programs for my ground-breaking views that seem sensible today.

One playing engagement I kept because it came before my trial was a performance at a festival known as the Foggy Bottom Block Party. It’s not the biggest festival in the Washington area, but it draws a large number of people. I was enthused about playing there because Foggy Bottom, located in northwest Washington, is where both the Kennedy Center and two of my favorite churches are located. The first church is among Washington’s most activist-oriented institutions, Western Presbyterian Church; the second is one of Washington’s oldest black churches, St. Mary’s Episcopal Church. Foggy Bottom is also where I live, where my son lives, and where my grandchildren live—grandchildren who were used by my son in his attempt to emotionally blackmail me. And finally, it’s where Bernard Demchak works. Bernie and I go back decades, having often run into each other at City Hall where we have performed our respective advocacy roles. He serves as emcee for the Foggy Bottom festival.

I sent an email to hundreds of friends and supporters about the event. Telling them of my upcoming trial and the one-and-a-half-years in jail I faced if I lost. I called the festival my “Farewell Concert.” Several friends came to wish me well.
It was a beautiful day, not too cold or warm. My fingers worked well as I rehearsed my 20-minute set that I had been asked to play. It would consist of Chopin, Beethoven, Bach, Joplin and some contemporary popular songs that I arranged for classical guitar. I even included a patriotic melody and a shortened version of my classical interpretation of the Led Zeppelin gem “Stairway to Heaven.”

A few minutes before my turn to play, Bernie came to me with a concern and a request. A musical group that was supposed to follow me hadn’t arrived. Could I fill their time gap by expanding my set? “Certainly,” I said, “I’m ready to play for hours. Whatever you want.” I practice for two hours every day, seven days a week. Whether I play on my own or in front of an audience, I am comfortable with a lengthy set.

In fact, Bernie had presented me with a performer’s dream: being called upon to replace someone who doesn’t show. That’s how legends in music and theater such as Leonard Bernstein and Judy Holiday got their big breaks.

When I created my song list for my 20-minute performance, I had to eliminate a lot of songs that I felt the large and diversified audience would like to hear. No time for them. Now I could put them all back in and then some. This could turn out to be a better farewell concert than I ever imagined. A good omen, I thought.

“Dennis, the group has arrived!” It was Bernie telling me that I needn’t play for as long as he believed necessary. He then added more bad news. “As a matter of fact, Dennis, we are running a little late. Can you cut down your time to 10 minutes?” I blinked as if to say that such a downward adjustment would not be possible; but my mouth fortunately produced words that were more sensible. “Of course, Bernie, whatever you want.” As if that weren’t bad enough, he conveyed a joke to me that hit too close to home. In his defense, I’m sure he didn’t mean it. Bernie has a great sense of humor. He can captivate audiences with his clever comedy routines. If he weren’t such an effective community leader, he’d make a good stand-up comic. His joke to me: “How should I introduce you, Dennis? As someone whose been to jail?”

I smiled. “Whatever you think will get the attention of the crowd is fine with me.” I didn’t care. When I’m about to play, nothing can faze me. Blow up a building nearby and I’ll still skip merrily onto the stage; blow up the stage, and I will continue to play on it wherever it lands. Bernie ended up introducing me in a simple way. “Foggy Bottom’s own, Dennis Sobin.”
After I played for eight minutes, Bernie held up a single finger for me to see. I announced to the audience, “I’ve been asked to play one more song. We have some great entertainment lined up for you after I’m through, so stick around.” These words I knew were somewhat self-serving. When I said that I was asked to play one more song, I made it sound as if an encore was being demanded of me. A request for more playing that I would graciously comply with. When I told the audience to hang around after I played so they could hear other performers, I implied that they might not have a reason to stay after hearing me. As if I lived by the motto of an escort agency I used once in Las Vegas: “Why spend time with the rest, when you can enjoy the best?”

Following Bernie giving me his finger sign and me giving my announcement, I went into the last song in my set, “Stairway to Heaven.” I could state various reasons why I chose this song—artistic merit, balance for my set, tempo—but none of those really applied. I selected it for the simple reason that it’s the longest song I know. Bernie said one more, so that’s what he was getting. A big one more. I even expanded my arrangement of Stairway to add a few minutes to it.

My performance ended with good applause. As I left the stage, congratulations were given to me by several people. Three stand out in my memory. A man said that he greatly admired my diversity, playing a range of songs that spanned 400 years, from baroque to romantic, from ragtime to jazz, from Broadway to rock. Another asked if I taught guitar because he wanted to get lessons from me. He was well dressed and serious, and probably would have made a good, and good paying, student. But I told him that I didn’t teach because of my busy schedule. I didn’t add that the excitement and gratification of teaching guitar to inmates in prison had spoiled me. How could free-world students who have so many material advantages and ways of entertaining themselves through other sources compare? Would Mother Teresa be enthused about providing food for a catering service in Beverly Hills? I’m like her, far more motivated by need than money. I don’t knock prosperous teachers. I’m just cut from a different guitar string.

The third person who came to me after my Foggy Bottom performance was a woman who said that I had inspired her to take up the guitar. What type should she buy: did I have a recommendation? I was generous with my advice in the event that she had a modicum of interest in music. “Buy a nylon string guitar, a classical guitar. That way your fingers won’t hurt and you won’t avoid practicing,
which is the key to good playing. If a nylon string guitar is good enough for Willie Nelson and Segovia, it should be good enough for anyone. I’d suggest Yamaha. Good value for the money.”

I could not have asked for a better farewell concert. It would not be forgotten for a long time to come, regardless of the time in jail that a judge might give me.

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I got to the courthouse early on October 28, 2008, the day of my trial. My attorney James Q. Butler was already there. I wondered if he had slept there. But no, his fine attire was in too good shape. Not a crease anywhere. I hoped that this would reflect his presentation of my case: no wrinkles. He was as eager to begin the trial as I was to leave. It’s always difficult for me to face my son under adversarial conditions. In a little while, he and I would be facing each other alongside the mercenaries we had secured to watch our backs. Each one a street fighter, dangerously armed with the law. Is this how feudal battles between family members occurred? Or what Shakespeare’s King Lear meant when he said, “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child.”

My son sat alongside his lawyers/colleagues. They were all government prosecutors who were bent on my destruction. The first good news I got that day was that Judge Linda Turner would be presiding over my trial. Unfortunately, that was also the last good news I got. We waited in her courtroom for hours in anticipation of the start of the joust.

Perhaps she was concluding other matters so that she could devote herself fully to mine. Anything she wanted as long as she handled my case. She reminded me a lot of her older brother, the former DC Chief of Police who spoke out for decriminalization and less onerous laws. He exuded strength and an extraordinary sense of justice. His sister as a judge seemed to be carrying on that tradition.

We waited all morning and into the early afternoon before Turner called my case. Her courtroom was now nearly empty. Then came the first sign of trouble. She called a recess after ascertaining that everyone was ready for trial. She told all of us to come back in an hour. Nobody knew why; an unusual development. Normally a recess is called when a judge is faced with a weighty decision during the course of a trial. She or he might need to decide a motion, deal with an emergency or have some other serious concern. But not before a trial has started.
When we all reassembled in her courtroom after the mysterious recess, she announced that she was reassigning my case to another judge. Although she didn’t say it, clearly she was washing her hands of me. What had happened since my last hearing with her when she gave my then attorney Stephanie Snyder the good news that she believed I had a legitimate reason to go to City Hall; that I had a good defense against the charge against me?

Butler and I and several of my friends and associates speculated about this new development as we waited in the hallway to find out which judge would take over the case. Perhaps Turner had too much on her plate, though that didn’t seem true. More likely, she recognized the controversial nature of my case, pitting a David against a Goliath. An unconventional ex-con David fighting a well-connected Goliath of a son. If she carried through with her earlier leaning in my favor, she could expect little help in the political arena to set up a law practice if she ever left the bench. And the way she seemed to be fading out with her weak voice, that departure appeared a distinct possibility. (In fact, Judge Turner announced her resignation less than a month later).

My take on Turner’s decision not to hear my matter was a little different. I had seen her compassion and perceptiveness firsthand at the previous hearing when she had asked me what my case was about, then rendered her personal opinion in my favor. Since my situation seemed to represent such an unusual scenario—the police arresting someone who was peacefully trying to testify at a public hearing on the word of an attorney working at City Hall who had a personal vendetta—she had probably given the matter more thought. Maybe she had one of her clerks do research into applicable law; then discovered that there was a basis in law, if not in logic, for my arrest. To the disgust of many judges of conscience, criminal statutes and common sense do not always square with each other. It’s one reason that many leave the bench. That’s what Turner’s one-time colleague Eric Holder did. He would eventually become the U.S. Attorney General in the presidency of Barrack Obama.

When I was shuttled around from prison to prison during my 10 years of incarceration, I wrote a letter to Federal Judge Stanley Sporkin congratulating him for his merciful decisions that put logic above law. He was a ray of hope for a lot of wrongfully-convicted inmates like me. He surprised me when he wrote back with a thank you letter. But the higher appellate court kept reversing Sporkin’s decisions. Finally, the beleaguered jurist resigned.

We got word about who the new judge would be, and were directed to his courtroom. The news was not good. Here was a man
with less than 60 days on the bench. He would follow the book, putting compassion on the back burner. We feared that he lacked the experience of a seasoned judge who knew how to demonstrate wisdom as well as legal knowledge. He had a plentiful amount of statutory information, having graduated from an Ivy League law school. A latecomer as a judge, he had done well for himself in private practice as a millionaire partner in a top law firm. Appointed by President George W. Bush to the judgeship, he sought to spend his twilight years as a King Solomon, deciding questions of law and human destiny. But it’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks. Solomon, the 10th century B.C. King of Israel, spent a lifetime developing wisdom that no pure legal scholar could approach. To render judgments that are wise takes more than searching law books. They require searching one’s heart, soul and mind. Hitler loved judges who followed the law. They created the legal basis and statutory justification for his Final Solution.

At 3 pm, my trial began. The prosecutor and Butler each made opening statements. Then the government put on its case. Two witnesses were called, my son and the officer who arrested me at City Hall. Through them, the evidence against me was presented.

Count one was that I had gone to City Hall in early November 2007 to testify at a public hearing about the Office of the D.C. Attorney General. The evidence of that was a DVD of my testimony, provided to the prosecution by a cable TV station that had televised it.

Count two: I had gone to City Hall in late November 2007 to testify at a public hearing about the D.C. Police Department. The evidence of that was a copy of my testimony, which had been found by my son in City Hall that day.

Count three was that I had gone to City Hall in April 2008 to testify at another public hearing about the Office of the D.C. Attorney General. The evidence of that was the eyewitness account of the D.C. Protective Services cop who arrested me when I sought to enter the building.

The prosecutor presented his entire case in two hours. That’s the halfway point in a trial. At that stage, the defendant’s attorney makes a motion to have the charges dismissed on the basis that the evidence is insufficient to sustain them. The motion is always made, but rarely granted. Butler did a good job in arguing it. He made a particularly strong case for the dismissal of count two, pointing out that no one had actually seen me at City Hall on the day of the November hearing. Yes, my written statement was found there, but anyone could have brought it into City Hall. Or I could have mailed
it there so that it would be part of the written record of the hearing, a common practice. But the judge wasn’t buying it. I was surprised since Butler sounded so convincing in casting doubt about whether or not I had been there that day. He was even starting to make me believe that I might not have been there. Indeed, it was a possibility. I would have to check my records to see. I had been to City Hall so many times that it was hard to remember.

Stating that all three counts would remain in place against me until the end of the trial, the judge said that he was sending everyone home for the night, me, thankfully, included. I was surprised at the reason he gave, going into some detail about the chief judge of the courthouse not wanting trials to go into the evening hours so that janitorial clean-up crews can do their jobs. He didn’t have to give such specifics for adjourning the trial. I pegged him as having an ulterior motive.

The real reason turned out to be his need to go back to his law books. He didn’t know what to think after hearing the evidence. Did my going to City Hall really constitute criminal behavior? So he let the law books do his thinking for him. As I left his courtroom, he treated me as a valuable but misunderstood team player. The very next day he regarded me as a malicious perpetrator. The difference in his attitude was the law. And perhaps his not getting laid that night.

I used what little time I had that night to say goodbye to my friends and intimates, and in two cases to ask for help. I called Stephanie Snyder. “How did it go?” she asked. “Terrible,” I said. “The judge won’t even dismiss a count against me where there is no evidence whatsoever that I was at City Hall.” I told her that I intended to do something desperate the next day, but something that seemed necessary if I were to have a chance. She made an audible sigh as she asked me what it was. I said, “I will tell the truth.” It seemed to me at that point that I couldn’t rely on the First Amendment argument that I had a constitutional right to be at City Hall for the purpose of testifying. That would be a good issue on appeal, but by the time it got decided by a higher court, I would have already finished serving the one-and-a-half-year sentence I was facing. “I’m going to tell the judge the truth, that I believed I had gotten permission to go there after I heard my son’s attorney say it was alright and thought I had heard Judge Turner give me explicit permission.”

Then I popped the question. “Can you testify for me?” Snyder seemed stunned but listened. She now knew that when I said I was desperate, I was not kidding. “I would like you to tell the judge that from the time that you met me, until the moment that we got the
transcript of Judge Turner’s hearing. I believed that I had permission to go to City Hall.”

She agreed to do it, bless her sense of fair-play-and-justice heart. But she didn’t think it would do much good, and in this she proved correct. Just because a person said to someone else that he didn’t believe he was flying into the World Trade Building doesn’t mean he truly didn’t know. How can you trust the word of a terrorist, whether his destination is a NY landmark or DC City Hall?

The other person I called was Fritz Mulhauser, staff attorney for the ACLU. I didn’t expect to reach him at his office that night. Even ACLU stalwarts have to get some sleep. But he wasn’t at home either and didn’t call me back after I left a message. Maybe an ACLU attorney doesn’t go home at night. Knowing Fritz’s commitment and his street lawyer skills, I pictured him roaming around Washington helping damsel in distress. Such as the women who are bullied by the “pussy posse” in the red-light sections of Washington.

Since I never got to talk to Fritz, I’ll use this paragraph to tell him what I needed. Fritz, I wanted to speak to you to ask if you would testify for me. When my son was on the witness stand, he said that he had no idea how I found out that he was an Assistant Attorney General at City Hall. That I must have followed him from his home to work one morning to find out. That is ridiculous since I discussed where he worked with my son and his attorney in the court hallway before our hearing with Judge Turner last year. But they won’t admit that. So I need you to tell the court, under oath, that the information came from you. Your testimony can prove my son is a liar. Otherwise, the judge might think that I’m a stalker. Even though the judge is a Republican like my son, I believe his knowing that I have an affiliation with the ACLU will be less harmful than the truth of how I learned where my son worked. Or at least I think so.

When I got to court the next morning, the judge confirmed my suspicion that he had spent the night engaging in legal intercourse with his Yale law books. In fact, he had already—In the middle of the night?—emailed copies of his findings to Butler and to the prosecutor. Precedent was not on my side. He could convict me, according to the case law he found, without any misgivings since earlier judges have found defendants guilty who were in situations not much different than mine. Still, he would allow Butler to present my defense before he lopped off my head. Snyder’s testimony was now more crucial than ever. I guess mine was important too, at least to try to get rid of the second count when only my written testimony but not my person was spotted in City Hall.
Butler skillfully questioned Snyder and me after we swore to tell the truth and nothing but. The prosecutor cross-examined me. That’s when he dropped the ball and made a fatal mistake that students in their first year of law school are taught to avoid. Perhaps he skipped that year, being as smart as he thought he was. He asked me if I had been at City Hall on the hearing date in late November when no one had seen me there. In essence, he wanted me to testify as a witness against myself; the only witness.

Fortunately, I had spent the previous night going through my records instead of following my original plan of enjoying the intimate company of a beautiful Brazilian woman who wanted to say goodbye. And lo and behold, in my records I found I had not been at City Hall on the day in question, and in fact had not even been within grenade throwing distance of it.

But even if I had been there, why on earth would I admit it when a simple yes instead of an aggressive no could mean six months in jail? Did I look that dumb? More likely, my son told him that I was that dumb. At least the prosecutor had the good sense to not ask any follow up questions after I denied being there that day. But it was too late. He had opened the door to this subject and now the judge stepped through it. Leaning over me like a suspicious God who wanted to know if I had said my prayers with sincerity, the judge asked me who took my written testimony to City Hall if I hadn’t. Fortunately, that information was also in my note. I told him who did it and why. “I had called City Hall the day before the hearing to confirm that I was on the witness list. But I wasn’t due to a mistake that someone there had made. So they invited to have someone drop off my statement at City Hall to make it part of the record of the hearing.”

The trial ended with the judge announcing his verdict: guilty on two of the three counts. About the two guilty counts, the judge said that there was direct evidence that I had been to City Hall. He did not deny that I had a right as a citizen to go there to testify, only that I “should have gotten permission.” He said more, but he went over my head with his legalese. Suddenly, he brought me back down to earth with a thud by saying he didn’t believe me when I said that I thought that I had permission to go to City Hall. His reason for not believing me made me feel ill. He said that he could not believe me because I had previously been convicted of a crime.

The ill feeling grew. What he said, in essence, was that once a person has been convicted of a crime, rightly or wrongly, he loses the right to defend himself against future accusations. That his hands are forever tied behind his back. Enemies can strike at him in any
way they choose; he must remain still and silent. Take his lumps. Prepare to return to prison.

I experienced an epiphany at that moment; a most unpleasant one. I now knew the key factor in the high recidivism rate. Returning prisoners don’t have much of a chance. The smarter ones get what they can in the free world before they are returned to prison. If they are going to be accused of something and unable to defend themselves, it may as well be something true and, even if only in the short run, profitable for them. I thought of a friend in a Florida prison who kept getting released and coming back. He considered his time on the outside as “furloughs” during which he accumulated funds for his future prison canteen accounts.

People who advocate more opportunities for ex-prisoners are concerned that we often lose our voting rights. Now I came face to face with the loss of something far more precious: the right of an ex-prisoner to be believed.

My ill feeling suddenly overwhelmed me. I became dizzy and passed out. An emergency medical crew came to revive me and took my vital signs. They didn’t know whether I had fainted or had experienced a stroke. This time I didn’t know either. They recommended that I be taken to a hospital. I accepted. The sooner I got out of that torture chamber of a courtroom the better. I had reached my limit with my son, his colleagues and the judge leering at me and perhaps secretly laughing.

While I lay on the stretcher, the judge looked at my triumphant son with what appeared to be a slight wink. He then declared me a danger to the community and ordered that I be transported directly to jail after my hospital stay. His words were a sign for the handcuffs and leg irons to be put on me. I am still puzzled by his term “danger to the community” which he no doubt got out of a law book too. Perhaps any citizen who goes to City Hall to independently testify is a danger. Freedom of speech is not a very comfortable concept for many public officials.

When I returned to the Yale judge’s courtroom a week later for sentencing in my orange jail jumpsuit and chains, I gave a brief sentencing speech as did Butler for me. His emphasized all the good I had done for my son in helping to put him through college and law school. As great a thinker and orator as Butler is, his words did not move the magistrate. Then it was my turn. What do you say in a bullring with an angry beast about to charge? Here are my words:

“I apologize to my son for going to City Hall and for the embarrassment I caused him there. A few months ago I stood before another judge, Judge Lopez, who sent me to jail for 10 days because I
had direct contact with my sister. The main difference between that case and this one is that I pleaded guilty before Judge Lopez, but went to trial here. Why did I decide to go to trial when I know that sentencing is usually harsher for defendants who exercise their right to a trial rather than plead guilty? I made that decision because I believe that an important First Amendment issue is at stake here: whether a citizen has a right to testify at a public hearing at City Hall despite someone in that cavernous crucible of democracy having a personal stay away order against him. Your Honor has done legal research and analysis and has answered that question in the negative. Whether the appellate court agrees with your analysis, only time will tell. Again, I apologize and ask Your Honor to show mercy.”

He was a little flustered. More than a little. Not necessarily a good sign. He asked the prosecutor what he should do. The recommendation he received from the winning gladiator who held a sword at my neck, while my son’s glare kept me immobile as if his foot pressed against me, was that I should get five years. The judge could structure my punishment that way, the prosecutor said, if he sent me to jail for six months, the maximum for one count, and then suspended another six-month sentence for the second count, pending my successful completion of five years of probation.

Five years of being pushed around and denigrated, possibly by someone like Robocorp. Five years of urinating in front of strangers for drug testing even though I have never used drugs. Five years of worrying what my son and his calculating and corrupt lawyer colleagues will do next to trick and entrap me.

The only satisfaction I got at all during the sentencing hearing was my son’s virulent speech, his “victim impact statement.” He went overboard in demanding my scalp. It was so extreme that my friends who were in the courtroom considered it a kind of vindication for me. He said that he had scars from childhood from physical abuse that I had inflicted. Thirty-five years before. This was a new accusation with no record or evidence or corroboration of it anywhere. No police report, no discussions with our therapist during our two recent joint sessions together. No family members who knew about it. Indeed, it had never happened.

The other clear falsehood my son told was discredited with his own written words. He said that not only was he and his wife, another lawyer, afraid of me, but so were my grandchildren. The last contact I had with the two boys was by letter while I was in prison when their father wrote to me about how highly they thought of me and how much they treasured the gifts, mostly children’s books, that I
had been sending them. Nothing could have changed their minds about me except hate speeches given by their parents.

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Experiencing another period in jail now seemed more than a vacation; it was a homecoming. I say that because of the familiarity and relatively high comfort level I had developed at the D.C. Jail and its annex. The annex jail is preferable to the old jail, and I now knew how to get transferred there quickly. Either place offers benefits if one values leisure time above freedom of movement, and can be content with humble surroundings. On both counts, I do well. Years of being in prison, followed by a lengthy stay in a homeless shelter, have conditioned me well.

After the homeless shelter I didn’t aspire to change my living standards as much as I wanted to change the world. It’s something I have tried to do all my life, with varying degrees of success. The suffering I have endured, from being called names to being incarcerated, has been minor, compared to the assassinations of my role models throughout history. Fire, stones, bullets and crucifixion have been their lot. Jail has never stopped me; even this book was written during my stay there.

When I arrived at the D.C. Jail after sentencing, my biggest challenge was getting hold of a pen and paper so I could begin writing immediately. That took me less than an hour to accomplish because of my knowledge of the place and the people in it. It was like going to a foreign country where I thoroughly knew the customs, language and citizens. I could maneuver about effectively and efficiently.

The winter of 2008-9 in my home-away-from-home proved to be a most productive time. It was also a happy period. Happiness for me is good health, loyal friends and making progress in my professional goals. All of that happened during my six months in jail. Outsiders who knew what happened to me in court provided tremendous support and encouragement.

They poured out their hearts in ways that gave me an embarrassment of riches, literally. Sometimes at mail call, half of the letters in our block were for me. If that wasn’t embarrassment enough, as many as 10 new books would arrive for me in a single day! Fellow inmates started to come to me for better, more up-to-date books than the jail library provided. When I wrote a friend on the outside to send me writing paper, word spread to others about my need. Soon I received enough paper to not only last through my six months, but perhaps the rest of my life.
One of the few things that outsiders could not send me were pens. That’s against jail rules because of the possibility of drugs being smuggled into the jail in them. My solution was to write Kevin Horrocks, the resource director of the Foundation, a most resourceful individual. He spread word about my need by email. Within an hour of receiving his email, a jail staffer summoned me to her office to present me with a large number of pens.

The writing projects I undertook at the jail included two books, an operetta for a future “From Prison to the Stage” show at Kennedy Center, and a large number of letters. The letters were in response to the many I received. While on the outside, I also got a lot of mail but could not always respond fully because of time constraints. In jail, I had the luxury of extra hours to provide quick and thorough replies. It was both enjoyable and productive.

I also had the time to complete a number of other projects for the Foundation. It is amazing how much can be accomplished when one is not distracted, when travel is only possible in the mind or through books, and when the responsibilities for one’s daily care and sustenance are handled by others. I wrote detailed business plans to replicate the success of the Prison Art Gallery in cities across the country. This would be done in conjunction with other non-profits located in different cities. If they had office space and an active membership, they could have a Prison Art Gallery at no expense to them. All the art for the branch gallery would be supplied by the Safe Streets Arts Foundation from the massive inventory of our Prison Art Gallery in Washington D.C. We would also provide free support services including press releases to generate publicity as well as samples of winning grant proposals that had generated funding for the Prison Art Gallery from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, Art Appreciation Foundation and other grant sources.

I also endeavored from jail to expand, strengthen and diversify the board of directors of the Foundation. I had the time to write long personal letters to people who would be ideal for it. Among the prominent individuals who came forward to serve: a highly respected warden, a well-known artist who mentored imprisoned artists at a women’s prison and an international collector of art with the U.S. State Department who was once an elected official.

Our next “From Prison to the Stage” presentation at the Kennedy Center would offer an excellent selection of plays and musicals. That would happen thanks to the letters I wrote in jail to imprisoned playwrights and ex-prisoners encouraging them and
requesting their works. There is nothing like a letter from jail to get someone’s attention. Combine that with an opportunity to have one’s work presented at the Kennedy Center, it’s no wonder that the response I got was outstanding. Included was a play written by Kathleen O’Shea called Women on the Row. The words in the play came from women currently on death row awaiting execution in America. O’Shea had asked the women in her correspondence and during visits to them what they wanted the world to know about them. Their answers provide a riveting tour de force that theater goers would not soon forget.

As the next Kennedy Center show drew nearer, we were short of musical pieces written by prisoners, so I decided to write one. After all, I was a prisoner and I had the time now to compose a musical. The form I chose was opera, where all the dialogue is sung rather than spoken. In traditional opera fashion, I included several arias: extended songs that are performed as solos. I called it an operetta since it’s a farce in the Gilbert and Sullivan tradition. Entitled Busted at City Hall, I turned my arrest into a comedy. There were many humorous things about the episode, even more so after I added fictional elements to the characters. It ends with the main character, Dennis Sobin, becoming mayor of Washington, DC, as a public response to him being arrested there. I was inspired by a movie I had seen a few years back, The Night They Raided Minsky’s. The film was set in the days when police were arresting skimply-clad performers in burlesque houses. If people can laugh today about such over-reaching of police, perhaps they would see the same insanity in what had happened to me. By presenting what occurred to me in a light way, no one could accuse me of being a sore loser.

I knew that what had happened could have been a lot worse. Reading the daily newspapers in jail, I saw stories of sons doing far more to their fathers than putting them in jail. Patricide is not uncommon when there is hostility between a mother and father and a son sympathizes with mom, as is usually the case. In one of the early letters my son wrote me during my 10 years in prison, he said that his mother sometimes spoke about me so negatively that he had to remove my two grandsons from her presence. He should have protected his own ears in the same way since he eventually internalized her views. I saw it growing as his letters began to question and finally condemn me based on her allegations. In time, he cut off contact with me, then conspired with my sister to steal my inheritance and savings. I have their letters filled with such threats.

My productive vacations in jail cannot be viewed as punishment. Not with my activist background and previous prison
experience. Judge Lopez was right when he said that I did not suffer during imprisonment. In meting out his brief sentence, he did the public a favor.

Later, when I was sentenced to six months in jail, my accomplishments would be the greatest yet. Not just in the completion of my two books and the other writing I did, but in the insights that I gained.

I came to the conclusion before the end of my sentence that I had to become more active in community service and political advocacy in Washington D.C. It was nice to have the national attention I was getting, even in jail where I was interviewed by national media, but I realized that the most important aid to my goal of living in peace was support from the local community. That’s what judges pay attention to because votes are cast locally.

I resolved to move ahead to strengthen this on two fronts. Both with the intention of making myself more known and respected in my neighborhood of Foggy Bottom and the broader community of Washington, DC.

Upon release, I decided to form the Sobin Guitar Orchestra to provide instruction and playing opportunities for beginner and intermediate guitarists. I would use my non-profit organizing skills to recruit as many members as possible. Perhaps even get funding to buy guitars for the players. That way, the poor and unemployed could be part of it.

In jail, I received a letter from a low-income woman in her senior years who knew about my reputation as a guitarist. She asked if I would teach her to play guitar. A light bulb went off in my head. Why not recruit seniors as the backbone of the Sobin Guitar Orchestra? That would fill a need that other organizations weren’t meeting. People often ignore seniors or discriminate against them. With the Sobin Guitar Orchestra, we would show others that seniors are able and talented. Capable of producing wonderful sounds to make the public smile and pay attention.

I was confident it could be done. I would use the same method of instruction that I had developed and employed to create self-confidence in my fellow prisoners at FCI Petersburg who wanted to play guitar. Seniors, even with impairments, could learn to play well using my simple “open tuning” method. I had finally identified the students on the outside I was looking for. Those who need a helping hand, an opportunity to prove themselves, a chance to show the world their potential and humanity. Just like prisoners. Let their children and other relatives cast them aside, but I intended to turn
them into valuable contributors to society, worthy of the highest recognition and praise.

On the political front, I planned to be similarly creative and committed to opening the eyes and minds of people. During my last weeks in jail, I explored my various options. I knew that if I decided to run for public office as I did in the 1980s, there were several avenues to take. I had a choice of which office to pursue. Several were up for grabs in the next election, including mayor, city council members and neighborhood commissioners. I could visualize my campaign poster: “Vote for Sobin so he can go to City Hall without fear of being arrested there again.” It would get the attention of voters. Then I would tell them my platform: that government should support citizens, not harass or stand in their way. That freedom of speech should be encouraged, not penalized. That jail should be reserved for dangerous people, not harmless ones such as seniors whom their families find annoying. If Nelson Mandela and Marion Barry could be elected after spending time in prison, so could I.

Midway through the 66th year of my life while still in jail, a dream came true for me. I was visited and interviewed by a feature writer for the prominent national music magazine, Spin. Many established artists would kill to get into this popular and influential publication, let alone get the five pages that would be written about me. Writer David Peisner came to the jail to interview me. After he and I discussed my musical goals and accomplishments, I mentioned my political plans. He said, “Do you think you’ll have much chance of making an impact since you won’t be entering the political arena with clean hands?” He knew about the false allegations in Florida that had resulted in my earlier 10 years of imprisonment, and the tricks my son and sister had pulled to re-incarcerate me after my return.

I answered him, “To me, clean hands are empty hands. Mine are experienced hands.” He already knew that they were musical ones, having listened to my numerous CDs that I had recorded both inside and outside prison.

Our political leaders would do well to spend some time in prison themselves. Perhaps not a lengthy period, as I have done, but at least some time. They would then see the results of mindless laws and mistake-prone judges who waste human talent and decimate families. Maybe then, they would understand the words of a sad but wise ex-con I met in 1965 who helped shape life: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” The words were written by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his famous “Letter from a
Birmingham Jail,” the same man who had handed me my college degree.

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Afterword

After languishing in court, my lawsuit against my son and sister for the inheritance and savings they took from me was dismissed by Judge Judith Retchin. Judge Retchin is best known in Washington, DC as the judge who sent a paraplegic marijuana user to jail where he was separated from his breathing apparatus and died after a few days of confinement.

My sister left her job with United Way of Salt Lake City after having a falling out with its director. She then took over as head of her own social services agency, People’s Health Clinic, in the remote enclave of Park City, Utah. The move reminded me of the book QBVII by Leon Uris (author of the Holocaust novel Exodus). In it a fleeing Nazi concentration camp doctor attempts to hide in a distant developing country where he continues to mistreat vulnerable patients.

My son also came close to having to make a career change when he was accused of breaking the law. It was a building code violation in an investment property he owns. In the end, his wife took the blame for the offense and was put on probation.

I wrote James Q. Butler from jail to thank him for representing me so aggressively. He had been scolded by my judge for that. I believe that if he had been a more passive lawyer, I would have spent a lot more time in jail. His unconventional style eventually caused Mr. Butler to get suspended from the practice of law.

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