A Detour From Destruction

by Ron Humphrey

When he was a 12-year-old boy, Mark Down's heart stopped beating. Hurled through the windshield of a car racing 110 miles per hour when it crashed, he was pronounced dead at the scene. But at the local hospital, doctors managed to restart his heart and revive him. That near brush with death could have prompted Mark to reevaluate the meaning of his life, but he missed the opportunity. "I was young and still wanted to live my own will," he says. Instead he set himself on a 20-year path of alcohol, drugs, theft, juvenile detention, jail and eventually, a California state prison.

The car crash was only one part of Mark's difficult childhood. His father, when he bothered to show up, molested him. Mark concealed the abuse from his mother, an alcoholic. Left to himself, Mark and a friend began running away, breaking into homes, and stealing.

By 15 Mark was injecting himself with drugs. "My addictions had begun and there was no stopping them. I was on the road to destruction." Any hope of a stable life ended with his mother's death five years later. He also lost his father and older brother to untimely deaths. Mark drifted in and out of jail until finally he received an eight-year prison sentence. Stuck behind bars, Mark released his anger and energy into fights. He was stabbed three times. "Prison was all about survival," he says.

Kicking Off the hinges

Alone in his cell one night, Mark wondered if anyone cared whether he lived or died.

The answer eventually came through a dedicated Prison Fellowship Bible study leader, who showed Mark through Scripture that Jesus loved him and would always be with him.

Mark was stunned. "I knew about God and I thought He had a plan for my life, but I was not able to find it," he says. "Through all those years, I realized that Jesus had a purpose for my life. That near brush with death could be the beginning of my life again."

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Visiting Room Sabotage

by Lennie Spitale

Like an onion, most topics have many layers to them. The subject of prison visitation is no exception. A series could be written on the various aspects of the visiting experience. Everything from transportation issues to entry procedures and back again. I'd like to address something different, something I call "visiting room sabotage." It's that thing that happens when you were hoping for a good visit and it suddenly goes south. It's when, by the close of the event, both parties wind up hurt and angry and later feel guilty for sabotaging their own visit.

It was the same when I was in prison, and it's the same now. How often, for example, have you and your visitor overheard these selfish phrases coming from an adjoining table or booth? Maybe it was yours.

Don't let the stress of incarceration ruin your long-awaited visit.

"What took you so long? I've been waiting for two hours! You said you'd be here at 6:30."

"You don't care what I'm going through! You can just get up and walk out of here when we're done!"

"I heard someone else has been visiting room when his or her name only to wash up, comb his or her hair, and bounce off to the visitation room when his or her name was called.

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Guest Column, Jim Liske

Entertaining Angels

Last Christmas I attended a party with Santa Claus, elves, cookies, punch, tons of gifts and, oh yeah, kids – 200 kids. I was at a church in Florida where for several years the church members have opened their doors to the kids of incarcerated parents and their caregivers. It was a blast! As the families arrived at the church and had their pictures taken with Santa, volunteers handed out snacks, hot dogs and chips. At craft stations, the kids made cards to send to their incarcerated mom or dad. Watching the children decorate the cards, I sat down next to a little boy – maybe 6 or 7 years old – and asked him about the card he was making. He had decorated it with boots, a saddle, a horse and a cowboy hat. I asked him if his dad liked horses. He quietly told me that his dad had worked on a cattle ranch, and that when his dad came home he would work there again. I asked him if he had ever visited his dad in prison, and he silently shook his head, “no.” (I encourage you to read “Visiting Room Sabotage” on page 1 for helpful tips on making the most of your visits with loved ones when they do come around.)

I saw he was working on another card, and I asked him if he was sending two to his dad. “No, this one is for my uncle,” he said. My heart just broke. This little boy, who should be playing catch with his dad – or his uncle, in the absence of his dad – was sending both men cards in prison. They would not be playing catch with him any time soon.

As I talked with him a bit more, the announcement came that the program was starting. He started to leave but suddenly turned back and gave me a quick hug. I guess he hugged the closest thing to a dad or an uncle he could find in that moment, as he thought of them and wished they were with him. In spite of the sadness of the moment, it was also a day of joy and hope for that little boy, plus 200 other kids and their caregivers. I, too, was deeply touched by spending time with these “angels” who are each so special in God’s sight, and I renewed my commitment to make sure that Prison Fellowship’s Angel Tree® program serves prisoners and their families for many more years to come.

And what about you? Has Angel Tree been an important part of your family’s life, this year or in years past? I’d love to hear your story. Write to “Entertaining Angels,” PO Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146.

I pray that wherever you are, this first Inside Journal edition of 2012 helps you face the new year with renewed hope.

A Detour From Destruction Continued from page 1

I was looking to God for all the wrong reasons, yet He never gave up on me.”

Sitting in his cell, Mark reviewed his Bible study and his eyes fell on Jesus’ words in Revelation 3:20: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sit with him, and he with Me.”

“Why I want to Go Back”

Mark has stayed “clean and sober” for more than four years, a miracle theattribute to his confidence in God’s power and love for him. “I no longer tell God I want to go back inside prison. I want to go back inside prison and mentor others, as was done for me,” says Mark, who has now for fear of the future.

Ten Guidelines For Success

Following are 10 guidelines I would suggest after observing these visits for nearly 30 years in Christian prison ministry. Maybe one or two will be helpful to you.

1. Verbally acknowledge that each other’s stress is real. You are temporarily living in two different worlds. Acknowledge that the differences can create misunderstandings. Empathize, but don’t pretend to fully understand the other’s stress factors.

2. Give each other adequate time to express your feelings. I recommend that the one doing time allow the visitor to be the one who talks about his or her life first. The prison world is a small one; by listening to your loved one’s experiences first, it’ll help to pull you out of it a little bit.

3. Give each other the freedom to be honest about your feelings. (If you can’t handle the truth, don’t ask for it.)

4. There is a time for everything. Agree together whether or not the timing is right to bring up certain issues. If one (or both) of you is not emotionally ready to handle something, you must mutually agree to put it on a back burner until the time is right.

5. Listen with your heart as well as your ears. For the men, keep in mind that, if the visitor is a wife or girlfriend, she doesn’t necessarily want you to fix the problem; she just wants you to know how she feels. (Since you are already feeling frustrated at your inability to fix outside problems, this should actually be a help to you.)

6. Identify the real issues. (But do this with gentleness and respect.) Most of the time, the surface issues aren’t the real problem. Sometimes the anger is rooted in unresolved conflicts. For example, family members may be hiding their anger over all the pain and turmoil the incarcerated one has caused, but be afraid to express it.

7. The conversation shouldn’t be dominated by one person. Agree to give each other equal time to talk about what has been going on in your lives.

8. Be kind. It’s not all about you. I once heard someone say: “Be kind to each other. Everyone is fighting big battles.”

9. Make a commitment at the beginning of each visit that you will make no unreasonable demands upon the other.

10. Ask for practical ways in which you can be of help to each other.

Here’s a bonus guideline for Christian readers: (a) Keep a prayer list. (b) Read the same Bible passages on the same days and discuss them at your visit.

Jim Liske
Chief Executive Officer, Prison Fellowship

Prison Fellowship

Visiting Room Sabotage Continued from page 1

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For Success

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Lennie Sutton is the author of Prison Ministry and a seminar instructor with Prison Fellowship.

My addictions had begun, and there was no stopping them. I was on the road to destruction.

“Open the door, I will come in and sit with him, and he with Me.” Says Mark today, “I didn’t just open the door to Jesus, I kicked the hinges off!”

Mark made a decision to follow Jesus that day, and his life turned in a new direction. “I surrendered my life to Jesus and for the first time, I prayed with a pure heart, not knowing what to expect but wanting something different in my life. I could see a purpose in my life now, a little light at the end of a long tunnel.”

Mark was water baptized in 2006 after his release from prison. He cleaned up his life forever, or so he thought. An old associate lured him back into minor drug use, and Mark was jailed for several brief stints in 2007.

“I still had some gray areas in my life that God was working on,” he explains. “God was cleaning out the old and putting in the new. He was building me strong for the future.”

Mark resumed his Bible study while in jail, where PF volunteers waited to help him overcome his lingering difficulties. This time, the message stuck.

In early 2008 Mark was paroled to an out-patient rehabilitation clinic. By August he had completed the program with such success that he was hired as a manager-counselor at a sober living program.

Mark became a member of a church in Dosis, California. He also began volunteering in the local community.

I was on the road to destruction.

“I want to go back inside prison and mentor others, as was done for me,” says Mark, who has no fear for the future.
How Healthy is Your Heart?

by Alyson R. Quinn

W henver we enter a new year, many of us make wonderful resolutions about how this year is going to be better. The resolutions look great on paper: We are going to lose ten pounds. We are going to get a diploma. We are going to kick those bad habits for good. We feel better, just thinking about all the great things we are going to do.

But before we know it, January is almost over, and then February rolls around, and our goals get fuzzy. Actually, by Valentine’s Day, we’ve put on a few more pounds, the enrollment period for GED classes has slipped by, and those bad habits are worse than ever before. Oh well, we say, we can always try again next year. But what if there wasn’t going to be a “next year”? For hundreds of thousands of Americans with heart disease, there won’t be. February is National Heart Health Month, and it’s the perfect time to reflect on the sobering fact that heart disease is the number one killer of men and women in America, claiming almost 600,000 lives per year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Preventing Heart Disease

The good news is that four out of five heart disease deaths are preventable with some simple lifestyle changes. Here’s some heart-healthy tips to keep you making resolutions for years to come:

• Get your heart pumping. An active heart is a healthy heart. Start an exercise club on the yard, do some push-ups before bed, or strengthen your legs by “sitting” against the wall without a chair. (Take it easy, though, if you feel dizzy or in pain.)

• Skip the salt. A little salt is good for you, but eating too much of it can raise your blood pressure to dangerous levels. Most prepared foods have plenty of salt already, so put that salt shaker down, and try to skip salty snacks from the canteen. Your heart will thank you.

• Eat your greens. As much as you can, steer away from foods that are high in fat. Fill up on fruits, vegetables and whole grains. They contain nutrients that can help keep your heart healthy, without the fats that clog up your arteries like back-up plumbing.

Of course, that blood-pumping organ in your chest isn’t the only organ in your body that needs your attention and care. You also need to look after your metaphorical heart: the center of your thoughts, emotions and will.

A wise person once wrote, “Guard you heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life” (Proverbs 4:23, NLT). In other words, you need to keep an eye on your thoughts, emotions and desires, because they can take you places you don’t want to go.

Left to our own devices, though, we tend to neglect our hearts. Just as hundreds of thousands of people ignore the simple steps that could save them from heart disease, we all let our hearts—already so prone to choose the canteen. Your heart will bring you a Feeling of health. So what can be done?

A Total Transplant

“Trying harder” to live a good life doesn’t work. If your heart has gotten hardened and dark, it’s guaranteed that your actions will be too. It’s just like growing a garden: If you plant corn, you can’t grow strawberries. And if there’s selfishness, pride, hatred and deception rooted deep in your character, that’s what you can expect to see acted out in your life, no matter how often you make great-sounding resolutions to do better.

But there’s good news: God offers a cure for our spiritual heart condition. When Jesus was preaching 2,000 years ago, He said, “Heathy people don’t need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners” (Mark 2:17, NLT). God is a doctor, and if you know you’ve got a sin-sick heart, He wants to heal you.

And what is God’s cure? He offers a complete heart transplant to anyone who needs it! He says, “I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart” (Ezekiel 36:26, NLT).

To get a new heart, you must respond to God’s offer of healing—not by following a list of rules or reciting some religious words, but by putting your trust in God’s Son, Jesus, who came to earth and lived as a man, was put to death on the cross to pay the penalty for our wrongdoing, and who God brought back from the grave to break the stronghold of sin and death over your life. When you place your faith in what He’s done to heal you, He gives you the new heart you’ve been longing for.

So if you’re worried about your heart, don’t wait for another New Year to come, Talk to your “Doctor” today.

You can send God’s Word to your children! Try our FREE, age-appropriate Bible studies.

Help your children learn how God wants them to live! Just write their names and addresses below and we’ll send each of them a free lesson. When they mail the lesson back, we’ll send the next one. There is no age limit, and you can sign up grandchildren, nieces, nephews—anyone. Sign up now to get them started!

Name of child __________________________ Age _______
Name of caregiver _________________________
Address _________________________________
City_________________________ State ________ ZIP ________
☐ Needs Spanish lesson
Name of child ____________________________ Age _______
Name of caregiver _________________________
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Name of child ____________________________ Age _______
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☐ Needs Spanish lesson

You can enroll additional children, just write the information on a separate sheet of paper and send to us. For Office Use only - Source code 7005

Your Name ___________________________ DOC # __________
Institution _____________________________
Mailing Address ___________________________
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You can enroll in the CEF Mailbox Club too! Just check the box below and we will send you your first lesson, Tell your kids that you have joined the Mailbox Club with them.☐ Yes! I want to enroll in the CEF Mailbox Club.

Have you ever placed your trust in Jesus Christ, asking him to forgive you for your sins and make you His child? _______________ When? _______________

☐ Spanish

*Please do not ask us to contact your child if there is a legal reason why you should not do so.

Send this completed form to:

CEF Mailbox Club
P.O. Box 190
Warrenton, VA 20186-9310

Inside Journal | Winter 2012
by Zoe S. Erler

Nick Vujicic (pronounced “No-li-cheech”) stands out in a crowd, and it’s not because of his winning Aussie accent or ruddy good looks. Although it might be the fact that he’s missing both arms and both legs that makes others grab a second glance, it’s something else that keeps their attention: his calm, confident demeanor sends a loud, clear message that he is a man that knows who — and whom — he is.

Born in Brisbane, Australia, 29 years ago, Nick came into the world without arms and legs. His parents received no explanation for their son’s disabilty, and Nick was forced to learn how to live in a world that saw him as a freak of nature. In addition to being bullied as a child, Nick suffered from low self-esteem, depression and loneliness. In his mid-teens, he edged close to committing suicide. But in the midst of his desperation, Nick found Christ and his hope.

Fourteen years later, Nick has traveled the world, sharing his story of victory and the Gospel of Jesus Christ with millions. The author of Life Without Limits (2010) and the star of the award-winning short film The Butterfly Circus (2009), Nick views his handicap as a vehicle to share God’s love with others. Not long ago, Inside Journal® (IJ) had the privilege of asking Nick a few questions about his unusual journey.

IJ: How did you come to accept yourself the way you are?

Vujicic: It was after reading John, chapter 9, in the Bible. I was 15 when I gave my life to Jesus. I knew I had to make my life right with Him but I blamed Him for my pain. I read how Jesus said that the blind man was born that way so that the works of God would be revealed through him. I said to God that if He had a plan for that man, I certainly believed that He had one for me. I totally surrendered the ‘needing to know the plan’ idea and trusted in Him one day at a time. I realized God wasn’t the one who gave me this pain. But what was intended for bad, God turned into good.

IJ: Is there something you can do that most people wouldn’t expect?

Vujicic: Open a can of Coke with my teeth.

IJ: How do you overcome tough days and situations?

Vujicic: By never losing hope and having faith. Faith is believing without seeing or feeling. I never lose my hope because God never changes, but there are still times of fear or uncertainty. In these moments, I remind myself of all the times I got through other troubles and that God was always there.

IJ: What do you do when you feel lonely?

Vujicic: Jesus forgives all sins, and that there are people outside of those prison gates who are more trapped than them on the inside. Prisoners who are depressed and scared need to know the truth of their value, purpose and destiny. God has the love to turn our broken pieces into something beautiful if we trust Him.

Rare Decline in US Prison Population

The numbers of adults serving time in federal, state and county facilities or under community supervision fell by 1.3 percent in 2010, according to an official government report. It was the largest yearly drop in the prison population after four decades of dramatic increases. While the drop is significant, the United States still has the largest prison population in the world, with 2.3 million adults currently incarcerated, and an additional 4.9 million on probation or parole. While the overall prison population decreased, it did not go down evenly in all geographic areas. California (down 6,213), New York (down 4,207), New York (down 2,031) and Michigan (down 1,365) had the largest drops. Federal prisons, along with half of all states, actually saw their prison populations rise during this year of record decreases, although the increase in the federal prison population — less than one percent — was the smallest percentage increase since 1980. On the surface, the shrinking of the prison population was largely due to a dramatic decrease in the number of probationers, as well as a decline in the number of people being held in state prisons and county jails. These drops can be further traced to actions of state and local governments which, in light of falling tax revenues, have been forced to reduce prison populations because of a lack of funding.

Nationwide, there were 497 inmates for every 100,000 residents in 2010, a figure that has declined every year since peaking in 2007. Black males were the most likely group to be incarcerated, with 3.1 percent being held in state or federal prison, compared to 1.3 percent of Hispanic males and 0.5 percent of Caucasian males. Across all racial groups, males were 14 times more likely to be incarcerated than females. The number of juvenile inmates in state custody also declined in 2010, as did the number of persons held who were not U.S. citizens. This article is based on a recent report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Justice.