

Can Sardines Be Lonely?

by Lenny Spitale

Picture a can of sardines—those tiny, silver fish all squeezed together into that little tin box. Kind of like prison.

If you're not reading this from a bunk in a huge dorm room, you're probably sitting in a cell. But unless you've been lugged to a segregation unit, it's unlikely you are alone in that cell. You're either on the top bunk, or (if you managed to get your own way) you're relaxing on the bottom. But either way, you're not alone.

I never really thought about sardines as being lonely. After all, how could they be? They're all crammed together with a bunch of other sardines. Uncomfortable? Yes. Lonely? No. But wait a minute, is that true?

There's a world of difference, between being lonely and being alone. When we're locked up, there's no such thing as being alone. The lights, the noise, the routine, the lines all remind us we share this tin can with a whole bunch of other sardines. And it ain't always comfortable.

When we look at how painfully small our "space" really is, we're reminded yet again that we share this house with a lot of other folks. The few possessions we're allowed to keep become precious. It's nowhere near the stuff we had when we were on the streets, but it's all we've got now. Maybe a few shelves made out of cardboard to store our canteen and toiletries. Maybe a TV. And a few special things, like letters and photos, which we tuck under the mattress or in a special box. But that's about it; that's all we've got now. That's what makes them so important. It's a big "no-no" in prison to mess with someone else's stuff.

But we've got other "stuff" that no one else can see. No, I'm not talking about contraband; I'm talking about memories. No one can take those from us. We don't

have to hide them in a cardboard box, and they never show up in a shakedown. They belong to us alone; they're private. They're also what makes all of this so hard.

If you're sitting in jail right now, then you already know (maybe better than most), that it is possible to be lonely in a sardine can. We want to be with certain people right now in the worst way. And that's what hurts the most.

So what do we do? And why am I bringing this up? Just to make us feel bad? No, far from it. I'm bringing it up because convicts usually don't. After all, it's not cool to talk about being lonely; it is a sign of weakness. But deep in our hearts, we know we are. We just don't want to wear it on our sleeves. But when we lie awake at night and look up at the ceiling, that's when we tend to take those hidden treasures out. It's also when, in spite of all the fish in the other bunks around us, we feel the most alone.

I've actually got encouraging news for you: The pain you're feeling is normal. We should feel pain when we're away from the ones we love most; it means we're normal. It's also a good sign that you haven't closed yourself down emotionally, as a way to protect yourself. (I know it's possible to do that. I did.) The problem with shutting our feelings down is that when we shut others out, we shut ourselves in. So even though memories can be painful, they are painful in a good way. Don't lose them.

And here's what else you can do. You can make the tin can a little more comfortable for the other sardines.

You might have heard the old prison proverb, "Everyone cries at night." We know it doesn't mean we all actually cry, but it does mean we're all fighting our own personal battles just by being here. I once heard someone quoted, "Be kind to one another; everyone is fighting big battles."

The Native Americans have another way of suggesting the same thing when they say, "Walk a mile in my moccasins."

I think prisoners can do this better than most. They know what life is like for other sardines. The challenge is that it's too easy to get caught up in all the daily negativity that goes with prison life. It's so easy to be swept up in the attitudes and the jive. We can even find ourselves saying or doing something, in the hype of the moment, that we later feel bad about.

The Bible says that when Jesus "saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). That's what we need: eyes and hearts like Jesus. To see that others are hurting and that others are fighting big battles. And to care that they are.

You know, in spite of what everyone will tell you, it is possible to make this sardine can a bit more comfortable. We just have to see the other fish as individuals who, underneath it all, feel the way we do. I once heard that the loneliest feeling one can get is feeling alone in a crowd. It makes me wonder what would happen if we thought about squeezing over to make a little extra room for one of the other fish? If we all started doing this, in our own small way, we'd make life in the can a little easier for all of us.

After all, we ain't alone in here.

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