

Politeness, Gratitude, and Good Humor in "Alternate Schools"



After 40 years in elementary education, it's been interesting finding a new ministry in Banning. There were no positions available in the Catholic or public sector. Even as a substitute, their lists were full and/or closed.

Early in November I heard about a large jail located on the southeast side of town. "I wonder if they have anything going on "education-wise"? (This information and thought definitely came from the Holy Spirit! I'd never dreamed of teaching in a jail.) Got in the car, drove down there in some trepidation, and made inquiries.

Turns out, the principal was eagerly in search of a substitute teacher for his programs. When something is "meant-to-be," everything just works out wonderfully. Got my sheriff's clearance to work in a correctional facility in record time (in 3 weeks vs. the usual 3 to 4 months). Before I knew it, I was teaching health and life skills to adult men and women in a drug rehabilitation program. Next, I was going up and down the "barracks" giving educational material and lessons to inmates who were truly hungry for knowledge and the opportunity for a GED certificate.

Officially, I became a Riverside County substitute teacher for the "Alternate Schools". That meant being called to adult jails, juvenile detention camps and jails, community schools (made up of expelled students forced to stay in school until age 18), Cal-Safe schools (for students whose regular high school attendance was interrupted by pregnancy), and classes for Come-Back-Kids (former high school drop-outs). Every day it was a trip into the unknown...every day an adventure.

I began doing long-term subbing in the Banning jail that first summer, then from October through December. The principal tried several times to get me into a permanent position, but with all the tenured teachers who had been laid-off, I was lowest on the totem pole for eligibility. But the Holy Spirit was still on my case!



Sr. Helen Vigil
Banning, CA

The county suddenly ran short of GED examiners. Now I'm going from one end of Riverside County to the other administering GED and other standardized tests at jails, juvenile detention centers, and public testing centers. I'm primarily based at the Banning jail, and continue to have daily contact with the fine staff and students there.

So, how has all of this been? Well, I've fallen completely in love with the jail population. By and large, they are some of the nicest people I've ever met. Repeated failure and the degrading, humiliating circumstances of incarceration have brought them down to a level of self-awareness and humility that is rarely seen in the "outside world".

Politeness, gratitude, and good humor abound among them. It's a privilege and a joy to serve them in any way I can. Every day is an adventure, deeply enriching and soul-satisfying. I can clearly see how all my former ministries have prepared me for this one. And I pray that the Spirit of Christ may shine His love through me, so that each one may know His astounding love for them.

- Helen Vigil, DMJ

G.E.D. Thoughts

Grimming nervously, thinking: "Why didn't I stay in H.S?"

Getting ready to take this was a pain in muh brain."

Guessing, when I have no idea...

Edgy when it comes to writing: "How long should it be?"

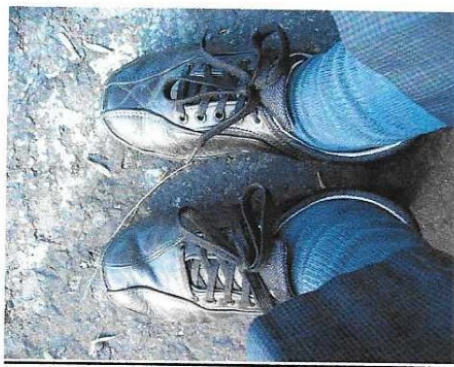
Enough? did I say enough to pass?"

Editng my terrible spelling and grammar...

Dreading the algebra, the formulas: "I can't

Do the math!" say I in despair,

Drained, yet ever hopeful am I.



JAILHOUSE SHOES

"GED walking!"

That's my gig

Thru the labyrinth of each brig.

GED standing...

That's my post

For 3 to 4 hours at the most.

GED traveling

Riverside County,

Whenever they get the courage to try thee.

GED watching

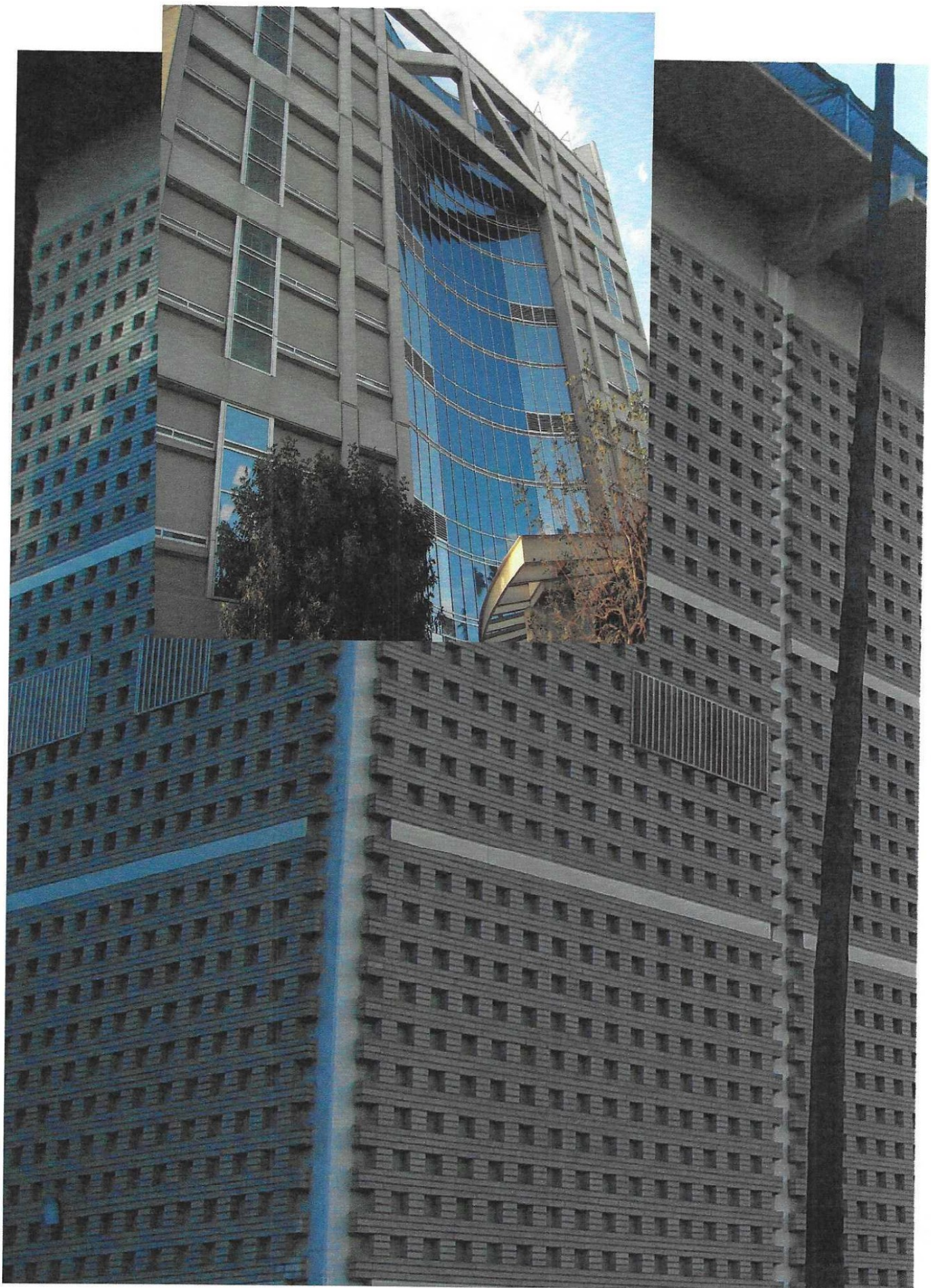
The inmates' shoes

Itching for freedom, eager to choose.

GED waiting...

For great passing scores,

That'll open more chances, windows, and doors.



RPDC – "OLD JAIL"

Old jail – new jail?
Can't tell much difference.
Still the unyielding bricks and concrete,
Still the blank, windowless walls,
Still the clank of metal and the loud
commands.

Old jail – new jail?
Can't tell much difference.
Forced air that grows colder each minute,
Inmates asleep to pass time in oblivion,
Lines of inmates at strip-down inspections.

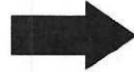
Old jail – new jail?
Can't tell much difference.
Students doubled over writing essays on a
bench
With 2 to 3 inch pencils worn to the nubbins,
Telling their stories...crying for the truly
"new."

GET A LIFE!

ME

I have a life ~ or do I?

I have plans for the weekend,
trips to take,
people to see.

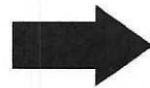


INMATE

Nowhere to go
No plans to make
No people to see~~
at least not the ones I want.

I have a life ~ or do I?

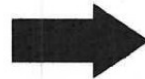
I have a job I enjoy,
And time for R & R...
Tasks to complete,
responsibilities.



Time on my hands...
Some times too much....
Programs, laundry, clean up
help to pass it.

I have a life ~ or do I?

I have worries, concerns
That weigh me down:
Caregiver, health concerns,
Busy-ness.



A life of unanswered
questions:
How long will I be here?
Am I safe? Will I ever be
happy?
At the mercy of others.

We all have a life~~or do we?

We long for true freedom
That begins with surrender...

NUMBERS, NOT MEN

69, 73, 75

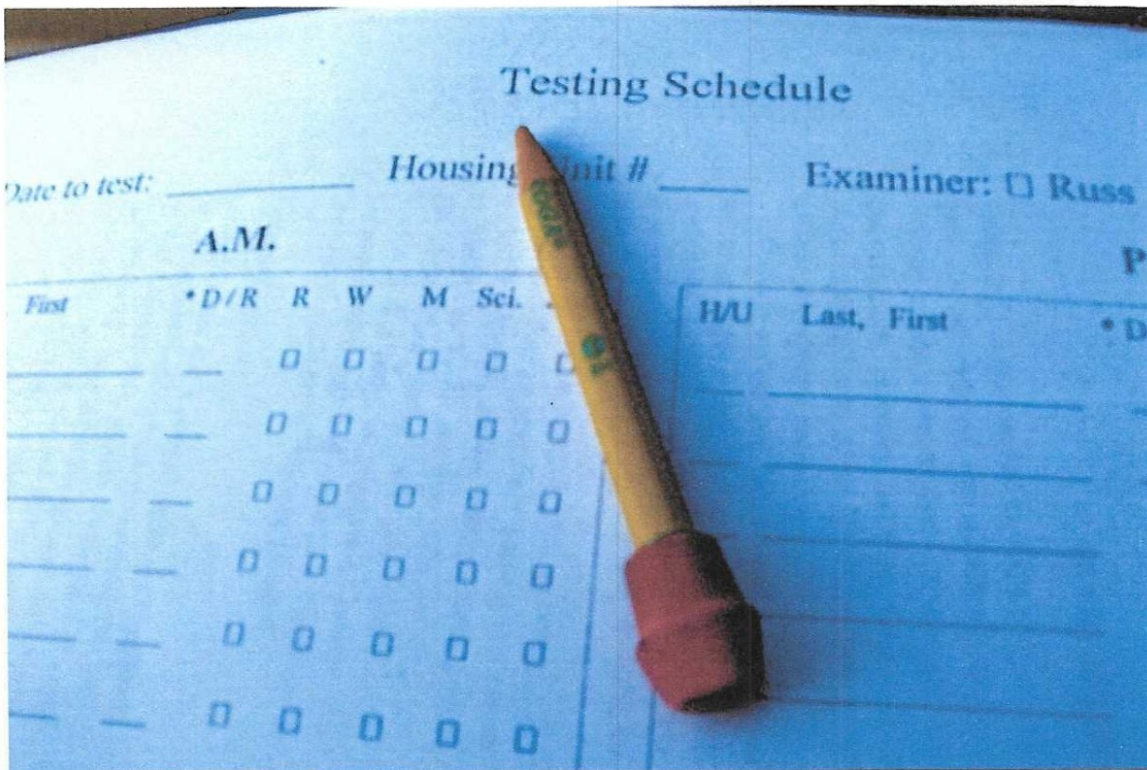
entombed before their time
a few emerge to stroll
in the dayroom--
hoping to catch a glimpse
of their
lost humanity

PENSIVE PENCIL

My pencil's starting to look like theirs:
Gone is the long & sleek look--
Going is the proud label: "TICONDEROGA" --
Round & dwindling the pink eraser.

But, like them, I'm still holding on to it:
Keeping their records--
Jotting their times--
Scribbling these poems.

May I, like my pencil,
Be diminishing,
Ever humbling,
Learning how to give all.



Attorney's Booth I

Not to be trusted...them or me?

Suddenly she appears,
Curlers in her hair

To re-take the science test...
I tell her she'll ace it.

Thick glass divides us...

A slot to exchange
A test, answer sheet,
And the stubby pencil.
I send the Spirit's gifts, too.

Prison life goes on around us:
Women locked in numbered cells,
Three emerge for their meds,
Guards, ever vigilant, about their
chores.

I smile as they pass by.

Not to be trusted...them or me?

Attorney's Booth II

We meet in a glass box.
Tomás sees and hears everything--
He finds it hard to focus.
So do I.

And why is this?

Because we meet on the 5th floor
For the criminally insane.
What sounds to hear!
What sights to see!

And why is this?

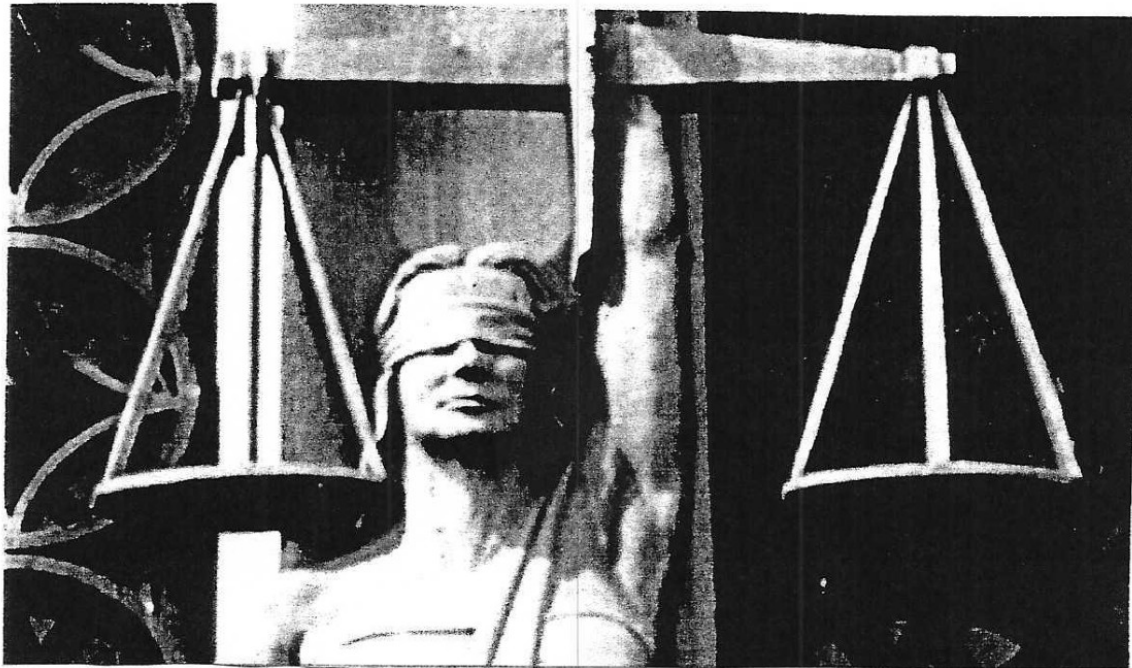
The 2nd day all is quiet,
Nor shocking sights to see.

And why is this?

A college group comes thru
On a "field trip."
A class on "criminal justice"
Is their topic.

And why is this?

What did they learn?
For only Tomás and I
Were there to see--
And no one was heard.



JURY DUTY

Gone is impartiality.
Never again can I claim it.
I know too much now.
I've seen & heard too much.

Gone is indifference.
Never again can I bask in it.
Their welfare matters now.
I feel & care too much.

Gone is blind justice.
Never again can I *not* see them.
Their life stories have been unfair.
Their eyes have opened mine.

So, can I be a jurist?
Can I be judgmental?
Can I cast a penal vote anymore?
I wonder...

"PC"

"Be advised: these inmates are classified as PC."

What's that?

Pretty classy?! Dig those arms full of tattoos!

Polite & cheery?! Couldn't be nicer.

Pleasant company? I feel comfortable in their presence.

But no--they tell me it means: "Protective Custody."

Others here may try to kill them!

Why? It's beyond my comprehension.

'Cause I think they're pretty classy gents,

Polite & cheery,

And downright pleasant company!

For the moment, they are in Riverside County's :

"Protective Custody."

For always, we are in His.

HOPELESSNESS

A stranger--

One to be feared

(don't talk to him!)

(don't even look at him!)

Alone

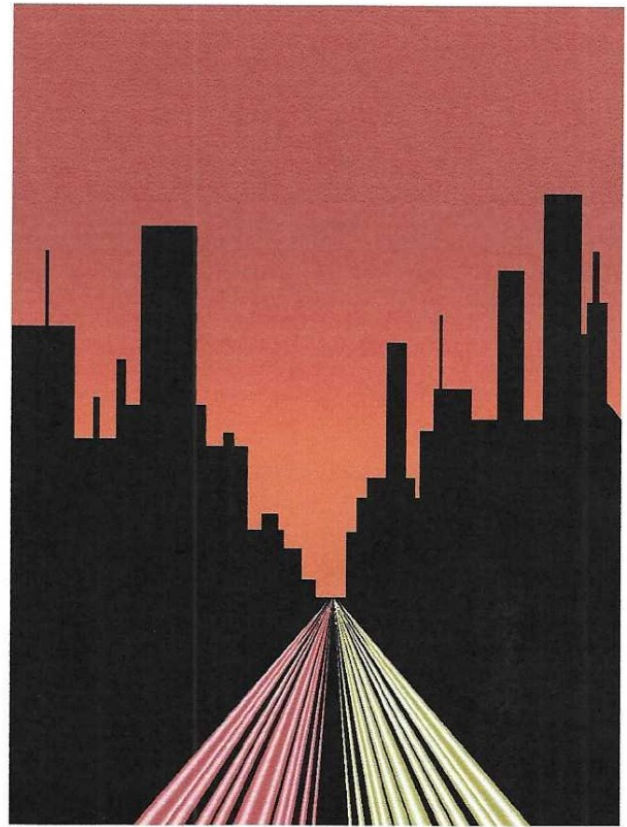
Adrift--

One who is exposed

(look how dirty he is!)

(he smells!)

Homeless



A loner--

One who is shunned

(a man like that can't be trusted!)

(stay away from that kind!)

Friendless

To be released in one month--

Should be cause for joy

But alone, homeless, and friendless at
50! Where is the hope?

VOICES OVERHEARD

*"Profanity, profanity, and all is profanity"
sayeth Koheleth.
(Sayeth who?)*

*The man down the hall useth all his choice vocabulary this
morning.*

*They put him in a special room to cool off.
Half an hour later came a counselor of sorts—
Told him: "Respect in, respect out!"
Let him know the consequences of his verbage.
(Since then, he saith no more.)*

*Meanwhile the examinees and I are drowning in a sea of
profanity.*

*Our guardians speer it forth with great regularity.
No sentence passeth without one or two expletives non-deleted.
On one side of the door: silence
On the other: x-rated noise.
(Koheleth weepeth.)*

SUICIDAL

The mid-morning quiet is broken with an inhuman wail--
and the commotion of guards.

He says he's just tired (tired of living I suppose),
too choked up to say more.

"Have you tried this before?" Yes, he nods to the guard--
still too choked up to speak.

Getting nowhere with questions & small talk, the guard
leads him away down the hall.

As he passes our windows his head is bowed and his face
is contorted--suppressing tears.

But his moans escape him and his cry echoes loud & long--
to be locked in again: alone and untouched.

jailhouse jargon

prologue

"Send a Kite"

(a small written note for help)

'Out of the depths I cry to Thee, O Lord !'

Never did high school. Now I regret it.

Is there still a chance?

"SEND A KITE."

I was too cool to do the cap & gown thing.

Now my resume has some gaping holes.

"SEND A KITE."

Hated school. My mind was in a haze.

Now I want to read and learn.

"SEND A KITE."

Can someone help me with math?

I still don't get it!

"SEND A KITE."

My life is one vicious circle.

Is there some way to break out anew?

"SEND A KITE."

I am so alone.

Is anybody out there?

"SEND A KITE...and a prayer."

part one

DESIGNATIONS

Is (s)he RSAT, AD-SEG, PC, or GP?

(residential substance abuse treatment,
administrative segregation,
protective custody,
general population)

Doesn't matter.

Don't ask.

Don't tell.

Same test, same procedure...

(S)he's a person, not a category.

What's done is done.

What matters now is passing this test

For a better chance in the future.

part two

TESTING DAY

"I came to test Manuel Martinez, please.
He's in 16-28. Is the Program Room available?"

[Program Room ready? That's the question...
Chair(s)? a table? (at least one was tested on the floor!)
Could be full of laundry(!), bathroom supplies,
Mops, buckets & soapy odors...
You name it. The Program Room can have it.]

"His booking number is 200712354."

The guard says: 'We'll deliver the body.'
(I'm hoping he'll include the mind, the heart,
and the soul, too.)

'WALKING ! PROGRAMS !'

Up steps Manuel...hands behind his back...facing the wall
For yet one more of his endless body searches.
A student approaches for his GED --
(No 'Pomp & Circumstance' here !)

A faint buzz -- the metal door is unlocked from afar.

In walks Manuel. Try to make him comfortable.
Help him focus on the test-at-hand.
It's not easy, but he soldiers on, hour after hour --
Hoping to win that elusive prize: his GED.

1st Degree or 2nd?

"That man is worth more than all the crimes he's ever done."

-Sr. Helen Prejean

Don't ask.

You let me meet him, Lord,
before I knew.

'High-profile case' was
what they said.

'Do you mind testing him?
He's under tight security--
accused of killing a cop.'

"Sure."

Manacled, hands and ankles,
Led in by two sturdy guards,
Locked securely in a 3x4
attorney's booth...

"Good morning, sir!"

Intense and focused
he takes his writing test,
Recalling pleasant days spent
with his dad in the truck.

I see his smile!

The next time I find him
sitting sadly, alone--
In the opaque-glassed box
'Til he hears my voice.
He lights up the place with
his giant smile,
So pleased to get this chance
to finish his test.

We meet again for a re-test--
intent on passing this time.

As I gather his papers to
leave

I sign that he will have
my prayers.

On trial for his life--
One life for another,
A speedy trial follows,
Takes little more than a week.

A pitiful defense is mounted:
short and incomplete--
No mention of bipolarity--
no experts to explain it.

Guilty on all counts
the jury speedily decrees.
A cheering journalist gloats,
but no one really 'wins.'

The penalty phase ensues.
Bipolar condition is finally
mentioned.

Makes no difference
to jurists
who recommend a
life for a life.

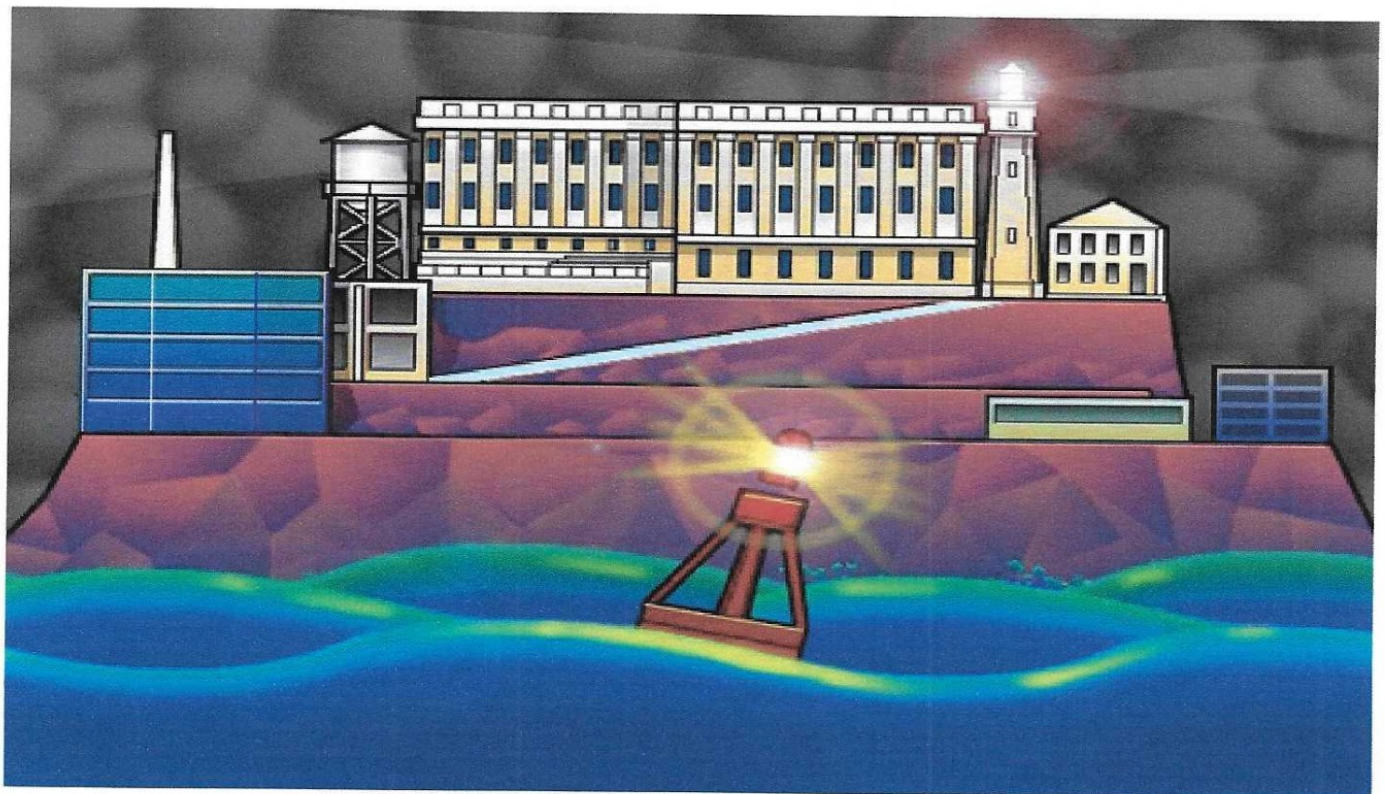
The judge agrees
and the man condemned
to a miserable existence
on Death Row.

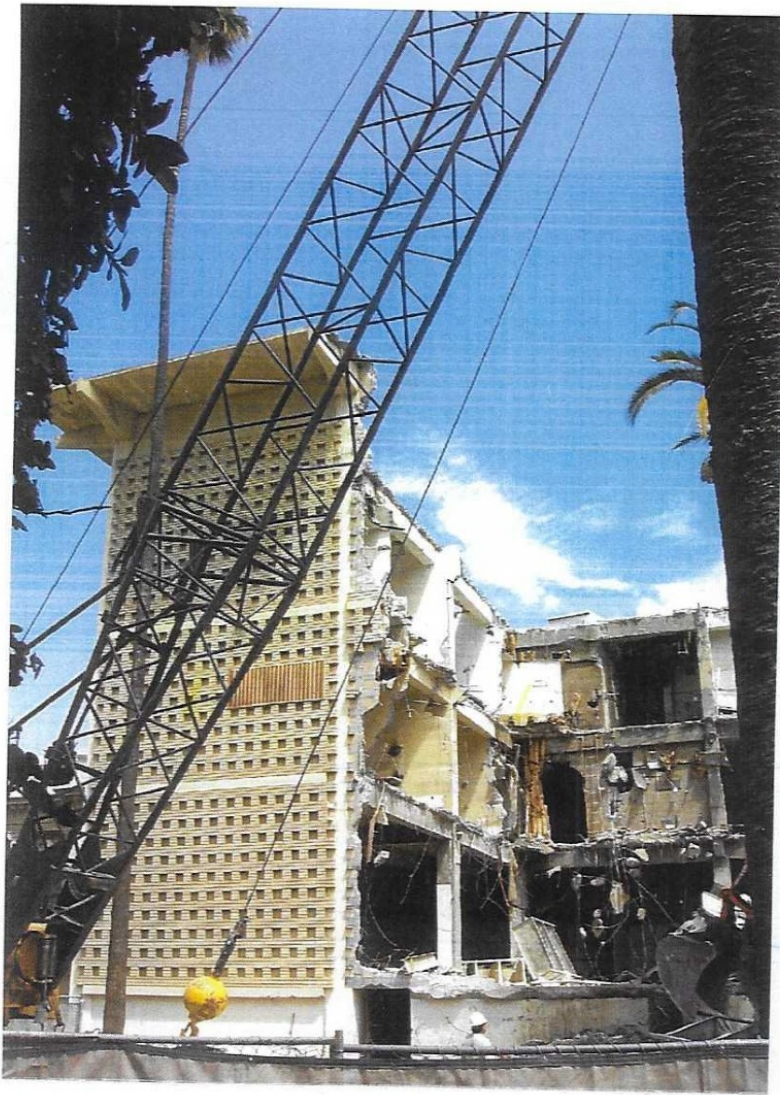
He's off to San Quentin now,
and my heart goes with him,
As well as prayers that he meet
with some redeeming Kindness.

SPIRIT

Ne'er to see the light of day,
The sunshine, skies, nor flower,
Horizon's mountainous grandeur,
Nor nature's mysterious ways...

Yet even through the man-made bricks
And heavy metal doors -- Spirit penetrates,
Enlightening the sun-starved eyes, minds, and hearts
With astonishing wisdom
and awareness...





OLD JAIL

Going, going...
Wrecking ball bangs away
At lifetimes spent
in ugly bondage.

Fallen walls
Expose dangling innards
Swaying uselessly.

Bashed bars
Open to middair at last,
Freeing the souls.

Blazing sunlight
Finally warms & shines through
Man's cold container.

Stars, Wind and Rain,
Bless this once-sad
Plot of Earth.

Old jail--
Going, going, gone.

