

The Shining Fire Hydrant by Birdman

My night was like any other night. It was 8PM, time for “close custody count”(All prisons have ‘institutional counts’ wherein they count each prisoner’s body to ensure no one is missing or has escaped. Not being there for count is considered a serious violation). The officer came to our cell and called my bunkie’s name after which he gave him the last two digits of his CDCR number. The same went for me. Half an hour passed and a neighbor comes to my cell and said they were paging me downstairs. I had not heard them calling for me. I went down to the podium and the cops said to me: “Why were you not in your cell for count!?” and I told them: “I was in my cell for count - as I have been every day and night for 12 years, and I have numerous neighbors that can verify that.”

It did not matter what I said. The cops told me to not do it again, and I am like, “Whatever.” Two days go by and I find out that the sergeant gave me a write up (a violation). I’m thinking, “Okay, I truly am not guilty of this and I have many witnesses who will say the same.” However, at the hearing the cop that counted said he looked in the cell two times and I was not there. It did not matter what I said or how many people I had who would say the same because I was found guilty and given forty hours of extra duty. I said to myself, “Screw this. I am not going to do the work. This is so unfair! I did nothing wrong and these guys are wrong about this.” I watched that count-cop count me and he did not look up from his count board once. His eyes never left that board. I filed a complaint against the officer. That is the last thing I wanted to do, but I was not wrong about this, they were!

I felt bitter about being ordered to do those forty hours of extra duty. In a phone call, I spoke to my mother about it and she wondered if I could perhaps just take it and, regardless of the circumstance and the injustice of it, see if I could do what would ultimately be best for me. She said she would accept what I would decide, but if I could, to act respectfully.

I reckoned if I refused to do the work, even though it came about unjustly, I would be guilty in their eyes. I chose to do the work anyway. I have always prided myself with doing exceptional work and I was desperately looking to find my pride in this situation, somewhere, no matter what. So, not only did I do the work, I did the best possible job I could do.

I was asked to shine up this brass fire hydrant. Though I still felt resentful about those forty hours of extra duty, I set off to shine up this hydrant and I really got into the job. As a result, this hydrant started shining very brightly. As the sun caught it, I could see my

face in it and I noticed I was smiling from ear to ear. I began to laugh out loud for no reason other than enjoying that moment and seeing the result of my work. By putting all my conscious effort into shining up that fire hydrant, I had become bigger than the unfairness that led me to my assignment. I do not know how long I was at it but when I was done that hydrant it looked like the prettiest thing in the whole prison. Kinda like a small lighthouse standing proudly in an ocean of concrete, calling out on how to steer, on how to move through this place.

I realized I was shining too and it hasn't left me. Many people commented on that hydrant all week; wondering how come that thing gives off so much light all of a sudden. I just smiled.

~ Birdman