

With my third Christmas in prison arriving soon, I am reminded of how coffee can transform situations in life. The first thing I was given in prison was a clear plastic mug; the second thing I was given was a bag of instant coffee. That's how I started my bid, with the gift of coffee. And it's not just me, this is how many of the guys start their bids here in the Federal Prison Camp. I don't think this is purely random or by chance. People here understand what coffee can do, the gift it provides.

Your first day in prison can feel like the worst day of your life. It's a hard feeling to hold. You sit there, unsure what to do with the difficult emotion, and then someone comes over and offers you a coffee and you smile for the first time on the worst day of your life. Coffee transforms that moment of suffering into a moment of joy. Not only does it warm your hands when you hold onto it, but it also warms your heart (even in an otherwise cold place like prison). It's a powerful elixir, capable of completely changing your environment and bringing a warm comfort to the soul when it needs it most.

This is not the only way that coffee has helped me transmute the many elements of my incarceration. I spent a few years in the "free" world dealing with my case before I ended up here. I struggled to tell anyone other than my family that I was facing imprisonment. I couldn't find the right words, I was embarrassed and self-conscious. I feared being shamed and outcasted if I told my story. But at the same time, my soul cried out in need of sharing what I was facing.

For months I kept my situation to myself, never feeling like the setting was quite right for me to divulge my secret. Until one day, in my local cafe, holding a cup of coffee, I let the words flow out to another regular.

"I am facing years in prison for marijuana..."

I was at ease saying the words "years in prison," with that coffee in my hand. And the person I was conversing with was relaxed as well. They didn't want to run away. They wanted to sip their coffee and contemplate the depth and complexity of what I just said. They wanted to stay and talk with me.

The cafe was the first public place I told my story. With every new cup of coffee, I shared my story with a new person. I looked forward to every cup. There's something special about a place that brews coffee, it also brews solace if you need that too. As the baristas ground fresh beans, their coffee offered common ground for me and the other customers to stand on. Facing such uncertainty, I needed that stable footing, that bond, that sense of acceptance and community, and I felt it most with a cup of coffee in my hand.

We often focus on the depth of a cup of coffee. The way the sweetness and bitterness bond together. The smooth warmth the coffee offers the mouth. But now, I also like to talk about the depths of the soul that coffee can reach. The bonds it forms between strangers. The smooth warmth it can bring to the harsh, coldness of a challenging life situation (like facing years in prison).

I developed a new and stronger relationship with coffee since my incarceration. Drinking coffee creates a moment of alchemy. It's a moment that brings light to the soul that resides in a dark place. When I have my first morning cup here in the prison, it's a moment that things feel right. Coffee has been a bold reminder and companion for me throughout my bid. Every sip touches and mingles with elements of my humanness. It's been a guide for me throughout my incarceration and in my larger life. Coffee has helped me stay connected and stay human no matter where I find myself; in my kitchen, in a cafe, or in a Federal prison. This is the gift of coffee that I am reminded of with every sip I take.