Reader Question: “What kind of emotions do you experience throughout a typical day?”

(This question arrived in a letter that went missing after a raid – I don’t recall where it’s from.)

I struggled a lot when thinking about how to answer this question. It’s not because I don’t know how I feel in prison, I do. But putting emotions into words is not so easy. Some basic understanding of the human brain can explain part of the difficulty I faced with this.

There is an older part of the brain called the limbic brain. It is responsible for all our decision-making and our behavior. The limbic brain is also responsible for all of our feelings (like love, sadness, trust, etc…). But the limbic brain has zero capacity for language. Our language (along with analytical and rational thought) comes from the newest part of the brain, the neocortex.

Since the part of the brain that controls feelings has no capacity for language, it makes putting our feelings into words very difficult at times. This is why sometimes you can get a good or bad feeling about something but are unable to verbalize exactly why.

So in an attempt to answer this question, I decided to share two entries from my personal journal. Both were written about 2 years into my sentence. This is a more intimate look into my mind while I’m in prison. Hopefully, it’s a worthy answer to this question.

Journal entry #1

When I wake up in the morning, my head hurts and my neck is sore. I’ve not had this issue until recently. The prison mattress is thin and cheap material but it didn’t really seem to bother me the last few years. It’s fairly dark and much quieter this early in the morning (5 AM). I shower now because no one else does and I usually have the shower room to myself. Come this evening, guys will be waiting in line to shower.

I eat breakfast (packaged fish and vegetables). I dress into my prison uniform; khaki pants and a button-down. It’s the exact same thing every other guy in here wears. The rough material is not comforting as it moves over my body. I spend a few minutes listening to the news on my headphones until 6 AM. Then it’s off to the chow hall to get my two milks and a piece of fruit and hope neither is damaged or rotten today. Sometimes I feel awkward at the chow hall tables. Sitting alone, I feel like an outcast. Though I do prefer to sit alone most of the time. At least I am not the only one sitting alone today.

It’s October and slightly cold outside. But it’s even colder in the chow hall. They still have the air conditioner on. I’m not sure why they do this, but it makes me and a lot of other guys

very uncomfortable.

I’m tired of prison, but I’m also used to it. I go through the motions every single day. Same thing, day after day. It’s a bit odd how well I adapted. I think I shouldn’t be as okay with this. I shouldn’t be able to ignore the reality of being a prisoner so easily. But I guess it helps me survive in here. Of course, there are days when I really hurt. When the separation punches me in the gut and I stop in my tracks and know what it is like to suffer. I struggle to feel like any of this makes sense in these moments. I find myself asking, “Why? Why am I here?” But most days I just go with the flow of prison life. I find little things that seem so large. Like how the moon called to me the other night. It seemed delightfully happy as it rose with an orange aura over the mountains in the distance. Or I might see a bird I haven’t seen during the past few years. That little tiny bird offers so much joy and excitement in my heart. I forget about prison in those moments. But of course, I always come back.

I make very few of my own choices here. My clothes are chosen for me, my food is chosen for me, when the lights go on and off is chosen for me, what kind of writing utensil I can have is chosen for me, even the time I can lay down is chosen for me. What do I choose…? I chose if I will write and what I will write about. I choose what books to have my Dad send me. I chose who I talk to in here (and it’s not a lot of people). In here, I am a loner and keep mostly to myself. I am quiet despite having so much to say through writing. If you were here and could see me, you’d probably be surprised by how quiet I am.

I spend a lot of time thinking about my plans for when I am out. I think about coffee and music. I have plans to work with both. I worry about my plans. They might be a bit ambitious, though that’s never really stopped me before. But I feel like much more will be at stake this time. I’m going to be starting completely over and feel like if I fail, my life will be a total mess. It’s a lot of pressure, but I have come to handle pressure rather well in my life.

I read books about coffee, business, Jungian Psychology, and birds. I’ve been called “the bird guy”. Other inmates call for me when a bird arrives that they’re curious about.

Journal entry #2

How do I bear the burdens that have been thrust upon me? Many men ignore such things here in prison. But that is not me. When life presents me with a task, I cannot ignore it. If I am a father, I must father. If I am a partner, I must show up as a partner. And the same goes for the more harmful roles in my life. If I am a prisoner, I must figure out how to navigate these circumstances in the best way possible to maintain myself and stay connected to my family. How does one bear prison? How does one bear the forced separation? By assigning

meaning to my day-to-day existence here. Meaning makes all things bearable. It adds value to my existence and choices.

My time is dire and I must take responsibility for that. I must understand myself and my loved ones, I must gain knowledge that I can return with and that will help compensate for my departure these last few years. Sometimes I am tired. It’s not so simple to take responsibility for one’s life. But when we do, things tend to get better. It gives me a sense of control over areas of my life that would otherwise be abdicated to this prison or some other external authority.

I am doing the best that I can to bear this burden. Combining the best of what I know, with the best of what I am learning currently and wanting to offer such knowledge to my family and community upon release and return to a more regular life once again.