

Letter from Calvin, Excerpt

My stay at the Olympia Zen Center, (OZC), right after being released in December from incarceration was supposed to be limited to about three months or so. The priest at the center, Eido Frances Carney, and I have known each other ever since she visited the prison I was at in 2002 and graciously offered me the opportunity to stay at the center as part of my re-entry process. The center is located adjacent to the Chehalis Trail which runs from the Woodard Bird Sanctuary in the north near Olympia Washington and meanders through forest and communities for dozens of miles. Since the center was several miles from the nearest bus stop I would walk the trail almost every day to catch a bus to go into the cities of Olympia or Lacey. I was not familiar with either of these municipalities so it took some time to familiarize myself with the landscape as I sought support from various social services. At the same time I was trying to adjust to the technology that had developed in my absence over the past 27 while in prison. Just learning to use a cell phone was daunting and adjusting to being tethered to this device was more than disconcerting. But of greater concern to me was the pressure I felt to secure housing with limited resources and as an ex-felon. Every day I passed huge homeless encampments which were also a new experience for me. Inside I knew that I was just a step away from living among the shadows as the affluent latte society that appeared oblivious to the suffering at their doorstep went blissfully by. The weeks passed swiftly and adjustments came slowly. Just going into one of the mega stores cause me anxiety.

In late February I was introduced to a couple of academic instructors at the Evergreen College by a sangha member. They asked if I'd be interested in speaking to their students about my prison experience. We made plans to schedule a time during the spring quarter for me to do that which made me feel more connected then I had in some time. I was asked by Eido to represent the center at the Faith Action Network conference which is an organization representing all religious faiths who collectively strive to influence state legislators to pass bills that address pet issues such as social justice, homelessness, prison reform, climate change, gun control, the death penalty, affordable housing and so on. At the conference we broke up into our district caucuses to pick out two issues we would present to the legislation later that day. To my surprise my caucus selected prison reform and homelessness. As the group strategized how they would present their concerns on these issues I revealed the fact that I had just been released from prison. This caused a flurry of questions being thrown my way. Since I had advocated for reform from prison for years I had a lot of information and statistics at hand. The group voted for me to present our findings and conclusions to the state representatives and senators which I did and then during a private meeting with Senator Hunt. I relayed my struggle to find housing and acceptance after years of incarceration and that well over 50% of the homeless population had spent time interned. I offered a viable alternative and presented our group's concerns which were accepted with attentive interest. Soon thereafter Covid19 hit and I was unable to pursue the invitation to Evergreen College and most social service agencies either closed down or had limited services. Buses stopped running and my search for housing came to a halt. I ended up staying at the OZC for three additional months.

With what I had saved and with the help of a few people in the Buddhist community I was able pull together enough money to offer the management an apartment complex nearly a year's rent in advance. By that time people were not able to pay their rent so my offer was attractive to the landlord. After a background check I was approved and moved into an apartment in downtown Olympia. Background checks go back seven to ten years and since my conviction was nearly 30 years ago it didn't show up during their review. But after two months they learned about my conviction and a couple of tenants complained that they didn't feel safe with me living there. The landlord, concerned about liability, asked me if I'd move. He couldn't force me to go because I paid in advance and there was a moratorium on evictions due to Covid19. But I did not feel comfortable living so close to people who feared my presence. While all this was going on a friend in prison who received an inheritance asked me to help him purchase a home so he'd have somewhere to go when he eventually gets out. I spent enormous amount of time looking for something suitable within his price range and found a three bedroom place that needed some repair. In exchange for getting the renovation done, I can live there. Instead of paying rent I use the rent money that was refunded to me to bring the house up to standards. I get Social Security retirement that helps pay bills and for food. Now that housing is relatively secure my main goals are to get a vehicle and dental work which the prison system ignored until it was too late. Meanwhile I attend ceremony and meditation with the sangha at the OZC, sometimes other groups on Zoom. I still walk a lot but mostly out of necessity. My support of those still in prison takes up a lot of my time. I write letters or emails to them and send cards, books, stamps, occasionally food, and sometime a little money. I can't do much but it seems to really help. Finally, I am revising the Way-Home proposal I wrote up long ago and plan to submit it to the county next year to address the homelessness and reentry issue that most prisoners face after prison. So there's a lot on my plate and it feels precarious at times but I go day by day and see gradual results. Undoubtedly I would be one of the nameless in a tent encampment trying to stay warm if it hadn't been for the support of many for which I am eternally grateful.