

July 1996

AA in Prison



A BIG BOOK ON DEATH ROW

In 1981, I was serving in a southern prison, doing the last few weeks of a five-year sentence. I'd been in that prison for nearly five years, and I'd been locked up, except for four months, since 1968. I'd made a decision that something had to change. As I drew near my release

date, I was determined to get out and stay out. I was nearly thirty-five, and had been locked up since I was twenty-two. I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. All of my seven felony convictions were related to alcohol or drugs. They were all violent. I wasn't a social drinker or a friendly drug user.

My job assignment, in 1981, was "Death Row Trustee." This entailed janitorial duties, and other jobs, on Death Row. There were about eighty men under sentence of death at that time. There hadn't been an execution since 1965, but the rumor was that one was happening, very soon.

One young man on Death Row I got to know very well over the months I worked down there. He was about thirty and had been on Death Row for six years. He'd killed a liquor store clerk for a few dollars and two six-packs of beer. The clerk was twenty-one years old when he died.

I noticed my friend reading a big blue book almost every time I went by his cell. One day, out of curiosity, I asked him what the book was. He showed me the Big Book. It was the first time I'd ever seen it. He told me of his membership in AA. The prison allowed him to attend in-house meetings. He was active in the prison group. He had a "civilian" sponsor who visited him fairly often. He told me he was "working" the Twelve Steps. I didn't have a clue what he meant, but figured whatever it was, it must be okay. This man was always upbeat, even though he was facing death. He always had a good word, and the other condemned men liked him.

One day I came by his cell. I had three weeks to go before my release. I was excited and a little frightened. I noticed he looked a little down. I asked him what was wrong. He told me

they'd denied his last appeal, and his execution had been scheduled for the following Wednesday night. It shocked me. He was going to be the first to go. Death Row was strangely quiet that week.

Wednesday came, and I was mopping the tier. The guards came, about five of them. They opened my friend's door, and he was led out. He stopped by where I was working. He smiled, told me it was time. I shook his hand.

At midnight, plus one minute, they executed my friend. The following morning, I was taken to the "death house"; I had to clean the place up. The guard on duty told me my friend had gone quietly. He told me he'd requested that the father of his victim attend the execution and had spent his last hour talking to the man. When they had him strapped in the chair, the guard told me, he looked out to where the witnesses were seated, and said, "I'm really sorry. Thanks for letting me tell you."

I've been out of prison for over fourteen years. I'm sober for almost ten years. When I take sponsees through the Steps, I emphasize how important Step Nine is. I tell them the story of my friend, now long dead. If they express concern about making amends, I tell them of the toughest amends I ever heard of anyone making.

I know my friend is in Heaven. I've thought of him many times over the years. I hope he's doing well.

Mike P., El Cajon, Calif.