

November 25, 1999

The View From Here

Everyone has something to be thankful for

By CARL STROCK

It occurred to me not long ago while I was in the visiting room at Clinton Correctional Facility that as long as you're alive there's always something to be thankful for, and usually plenty to be thankful for.

It occurred to me because I was chatting with a fellow who is locked away for up to 25 years and has lost most of what is important to him, especially his children, and what we found to talk about at one point was the great earthquake in Turkey, which had just occurred.

Imagine your physical world crashing down on you like that, we mused. Imagine being pinned under a ton of concrete, barely able to breath, hoping to be rescued, and hope running out.

Imagine waking up in such a scene of devastation and searching desperately for the people you love, and so on. It is almost too horrible to contemplate.

Maximum security prison in upstate New York is not so bad. True, you can't make a move without a guard, and true, you live in a steel-and-cement cell the size of a closet, from which you cannot see other human beings on a regular basis. But the inmate told me what he had: food, a roof over his head, and most importantly, friends.

He returns to the block after a visit to the yard or the library, and as he passes other cells, guys call out, "Hey, Jack!" and that makes a person feel good.

Things could be worse for anyone. For him, he could be in a Turk's position. For me, I could be in his position. For any of us, we could have been on EgyptAir Flight 990 the other day.

I realize there is a movement abroad to focus on one's miseries and see oneself as a victim or, even more dramatically, as a "survivor," and that one gets plenty of favorable attention doing that sort of thing, but even if you are so inclined, I think it might be a good idea to step back for a day and think in a realistic way about what you have to be thankful for. Not just our customary blessings before we dig into the Butterball turkey but about the hard fact of being alive, first of all, and then about the further hard facts of being more or less comfortable and more or less free, in contrast to a great many people in the world.

I always return to the subject of prison probably because of this one case I'm interested in, and I wonder how many people might be locked up for crimes they didn't commit.

Probably not many, but New York state holds 70,000 prisoners, and I can't believe that all of them were fairly convicted. Life just isn't so perfect. If 1 percent of them got railroaded, that's 700 people. If one-tenth of 1 percent, that's 70 people.

I know I could be one of those 70, and I believe you could too, dear reader. You or I could be locked right now in a cell that looks out onto a blank wall, with the prospect of no different scenery for the next 20 years, knowing that we did not do what we were convicted of doing.

Knowing that our life got constricted to a tiny cube of space because of circumstances that we can't quite understand. Remembering our belief that at some step in the legal process everything would get straightened out but how it never did, and now the steps are all finished, and this is our life.

Think of it!

You can be certain there are people like that in the prison system, not just in New York but in every state and in every country - one here, a few there, maybe a lot over there.

It's a chilling thought, isn't it? I introduce it to leaven your holiday dinner.

Yet even these prisoners don't have the worst of it, and if they are to rise to their limited daily business, they wisely remind themselves of how well off they are, relatively speaking.

I understand that if you continue this line of reasoning - each person giving thanks for not being as bad off as the next person down the line - you eventually get to the end of the line and reach those people than whom no one is worse off, but those people are all dead and so need not concern us. I'm talking about the quick. We're all blessed, in my view.