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Maximum Security: The True Meaning of Freedom

by Alan Gompers

Chapter 1

It is a cloudless afternoon in the autumn of 1983. I am inmate #80A-2139 in Eastern New York Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison outside Naponoch, New York.

Hundreds of inmates are out in the prison yard. The yard is huge, probably four to five acres; surrounding the whole complex is an immense concrete wall, with four equidistant gun towers on top. Some inmates, like me, stroll around in the sunshine. Others shoot hoops, lift weights, or play cards. A few groups huddle around outdoor television sets screaming obscenities as they watch a football game. A dozen or so lie on the patchy grass watching joggers circle the track. At the far end of the yard, a few guys hit softballs and run around a baseball diamond.

I find some empty bleachers where I can be alone to enjoy the beautiful weather. Climbing to the top, I sit down, close my eyes, and turn my face to the sun.

The seat vibrates beneath me. The rumbling stops, a voice breaks the stillness, and I open my eyes. An inmate is sitting a few feet away, unaware of my presence, ranting to himself. I catch the gist of what he's saying. He's going to be released in a few weeks and the first thing he plans to do is settle up with a whole lot of people who wronged him: the lawyer who misrepresented him, the judge who sentenced him, the wife who betrayed him.

His face is contorted with anger and bitterness. I can feel the waves of his negative energy as vividly as the vibrations in the bleachers under me. How can he be so unhappy when he's getting out? This guy is about to get his freedom back. Shouldn't he be more optimistic and grateful? I listen to his raving and realize that whether inside or outside, nothing will change for him. He will take his prison out into the world in the form of his rage and resentment.

I understand. For most of my life, I too have lived on an emotional roller coaster, unconscious of everything going on around me, aware only of my own dissatisfaction. We are both unwilling inhabitants of a community of a thousand men whose lives are defined by limitations and constraints. We live inside the same walls, under the same gun towers. My wife, like his, is with another man. My livelihood and money are gone. My children seem part of a different lifetime. This man is getting out in a few weeks, but I must serve thirteen more years before I even get a chance to see the parole board. There is a possibility that I will spend the rest of my life here. Under the circumstances, I could be as miserable as this guy.

And yet ...

As I sit here in these bleachers, I am happier and more at peace than I have ever been – more than I ever imagined was possible. I am aware of a profound calm emanating from deep inside me, one that brings with it a sense of joy and contentment. I am glad to be alive, grateful for the gift of a beating heart.

I have found freedom. *I have learned that true freedom flows uninterrupted, deep inside every human being – an internal, eternal river of serenity, independent of all worldly things, available to everyone, all the time, regardless of outer circumstances.*

And I found this behind the walls of a maximum security prison.

This is my story ...