

George W.

Friendship

Nonfiction

I enjoyed calling my friend "Mr. Bill," because I truly respected him that much. I was a person who never respected anyone.

We were both abused in the home. I was born into a family of alcoholics. There are no pretty words to describe my parents; they were drunks. My dad was a mean drunk. He would come home from work, see me, and decide it was time for a workout. He was 200 pounds and used a closed fist. My mother was no saint; she would often get a few kicks in when my dad was finished. From the ages of 5 to 16, I was beaten on a near daily basis. Twice I almost died. I always tried to figure out what I was doing wrong so I could change it and stop the beatings. Vivid in my memory is my father constantly telling me. "Stop your crying. Real men don't cry." It was a lesson I learned well and carried inside 'til late in life.

Billy's abuse was far more painful and destructive. His stepfather sexually abused and raped him between the ages of 10 and 12. Billy was shooting up heroin by the age of 14; a full-blown junkie by 16. I would tell him I wish we could have changed places. I wished I could have spared him the pain.

We met in 1975. He had 18 months in on his natural life sentence. I had nine. At first I didn't like him. Prisons are not about making friends and building up trust. We were seen as mad dog killers, no longer human but the sum of our con numbers. I deserved a murder rap because I beat a man to death. But Billy partook in an armed robbery that went wrong: his partner stabbed a man to death. By felony murder rule, all involved are charged with first-degree murder if someone dies. I was convicted of second-degree, making me eligible for parole after 15 years. Never was Billy envious of my possible release.

We spent 11 years together before I was classed to another institution. For the next 11 years we had no contact or communication. But there were times when someone would come up to me and ask if I knew Billy so and so, and my heart would actually skip a beat. The prison grapevine worked in those days, and I'd get a full report on what my friend had been up to. Now the system has men so scared they won't deliver messages like that.

I came kicking and screaming to the institution where I am today, which at the time was just for lifers. That meant if you came here, you died here. To my complete surprise, Billy greeted me in the yard. I had believed I would never feel or experience real joy as a prisoner, but seeing him was a bucketful of joy for me. At first I was horrified at how much he had aged; but I too had aged badly. Prison takes its toll on you one way or the other.

Billy had changed in other ways, though; he was more relaxed and seemed to have a kind of peace all men search for but seldom attain. I liked what I saw. I was finally in a place where I honestly wanted to change. I was too old to continue fighting the battles that ran inside me. So I started going to the programs he was attending.

He had gotten married to a woman from out of state. I myself had met a woman and shared a wonderful friendship with her for 25 years. Pam always wanted more than a friendship, but I always told her she could do better than me. I cared about her but was afraid I'd hurt her. When she died in 2005, it was the first time I ever felt a kind of pain that no pill could relieve. It was Billy and other good friends here who propped me up and carried me through the toughest period of my life. I contemplated suicide but was smothered with love from these friends. While the system did not give a rat's ass about my torment, this group of men who society deemed unworthy to be on the streets nursed me back to a functioning human being.

Billy got us both enrolled in a 4-year college program. I wanted to quit the first semester because I didn't think I was smart enough. Billy faltered right from the start. But I did well, and I encouraged him and he hung in and began to do well also. Then Billy got sick.

Initially we thought it was just a stomach thing. The food here isn't always the best. He couldn't keep anything down. He put in sick slip after sick slip. Their answer was antacid tablets. I try not to be critical of the medical staff here but they really dropped the ball on this one. He kept getting worse. It was months before they did the blood work that showed something was truly wrong.

They started taking him out to the hospital, where after months of tests, needles, and MRIs, they determined he had incurable cancer tumors in his liver. Only a liver transplant might have helped. But inmates are barred from such things. Our lives are less valuable than others'. From the time of diagnosis until he passed away was less than two months.

Some people will say I'm lucky because I had time to spend with my friend before he died. I say Bullshit. Because my life was turned into a living hell. I watched him die on a daily basis, piece by piece, cell by cell. I kept myself in a constant state of denial. Billy was not going to die. He was going to beat this dreaded disease.

I saw him lose most of his body weight. His voice became a tiny whisper as he constantly threw up and his own stomach acids ate away the lining in his throat. The times he could barely walk, they would take him out to the hospital and put him on meds and IVs. He would rebound and be sent back. We would go through this process half a dozen times. Each time the pain worsened for me.

We walked in the yard together before his final trip out. I was able to tell him the things I needed to, including that I loved him, which he just kinda waved off with a weak smile. When I found out they were about to take him, I ran down to our H.S.U. (Health Services Unit) to see him one last time. I had one last thing to say to him. I got there just minutes before he would go. I hugged him. I didn't care what the others thought. Love and compassion are not common sights in this place. I whispered I was sorry I hadn't been able to comfort him and ease his pain. In his soft whisper, he answered, "You've been a good friend." Those, his last words to me, keep echoing in my head.

News of his passing brought me to my knees. I have always been a strong man. I have always been able to take a punch or a beating without a whimper. But the death of my friend hurt me in ways I couldn't prepare for. Then I had to do the hardest thing I ever had to do: tell Billy's wife Patty. I must have written ten letters before I got it right. I was thankful to hear back that she had come to Massachusetts to spend the last days with her love and to take his body back to New York for burial.

I am still mourning the loss of my friend. There are times when I run to my cell and cry. In writing this I have had to stop a few times to shed tears. My voice still cracks when I try to speak of him. As I write, it is fourteen days to the anniversary of his passing. When I look back, it's like looking at a train wreck. I'm the train wreck. I have been in prison for 35 years and have never been on such a rollercoaster of feeling and emotions.

I deal with the loss daily. The one good thing is that I have friends who have helped me get through. I even have outside friends from the programs I attend who also knew Billy, who are there for me when I need them. Seeing their grief and sorrow is important to me.

I speak to Billy often. Some people will think I'm nuts but I keep a conscious link with my friend. I know that wherever he may be, he is at peace, his torment is over. And I have asked that when my time arrives, he come get me and help me on my journey.

I have continued on with college; I'm a little over half way to getting a degree. I'm going to get that degree for Billy. Patty and I write regularly and are becoming friends. Billy would have liked that. I now try to help others the way he helped me. I have put on 30 lbs. Using food for comfort and that's not been good for me. After the New Year, it's diet, diet, diet.

The prison system still grinds, its wheels slowly turning. It treated Billy's death as just another changed in the count. Someone will take his place, his bed will be filled, all's back in

balance once again. There is one thing that doesn't figure in the system: that one of its occupants, one of its numbers, would fully become a human being who feels and cares.