

The benefits of being locked up **by Peter Murnane**

A woman who had been a political prisoner told in a powerful interview how she had survived many solitary years locked in a small cell: she went travelling! She pictured the long road from her hometown to another city and set out each day to imagine walking ten kilometres of it, pacing her cell while recalling the sights, sounds and smells of her day's 'journey'.

When not travelling, she worked hard on another project. A big nail projected a few centimetres from her doorpost. Without any tools and against common sense she promised herself that she would pull it out. Defying prison regulations, each week she removed a single thread from the rough towel that was issued, taking it from a stripe in the fabric so that it would not be noticed. After some weeks she braided these threads into a cord, made a noose and began to pull on the nail. It took months of secret effort and manipulation, but at last it moved slightly. With much more work she rejoiced to pull it out at last, and ground it into a steel carving tool.

Recalling her story of overcoming solitude removes any slight burdens I feel at being confined by COVID-19. Compared to that prisoner, I have no problems at all! I can walk in lovely autumn streets; greet people from a safe distance and dogs from close-up. There are many books to read - that woman prisoner could only remember hers - and I can listen to music.

It is good to let the physical boundaries of my room remind me that there are obvious limits to my bodily strength, my intelligence, memory, patience and lifespan. In normal times we seldom think of these limits, but it's futile - and destructive - to try to hide from them.

Being alone, apart from community meals and prayers, I have more opportunity to discover - I'm a slow learner! - what actually is this person who sits here typing. An infinite mystery, of course; but as I recall a recent newspaper article about Captain Cook landing here 250 years ago, I can ask:

'Where will I be in 250 years?' It's a good question.

I've been fortunate not to have had a life full of exhausting labour, but enough leisure and education to ponder the big questions: What came before the Big Bang? Why did it happen? What is the future of us humans who have evolved on this tiny planet? What is a successful human life?

Alone or in the company of friends I can rejoice to reflect that science and faith combine to give me the enormous privilege of knowing that, mind-blowing as it is, the universe and ourselves are the work of a Being that is conscious and personal. The wisest thinkers, saints and scriptures show us that this Being is also infinitely loving. If extra quiet and solitude helps me to appreciate this more deeply... bring it on!