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Father and son serving time in same prison

Mary Ann McGivern | Feb. 25, 2014 NCR Today

I got a call from a man in prison last week. He?s one of several I?ve known for years and have come to like and respect. This man, I?ll call him Joe, wanted to talk out a problem. His father had just been transferred to the geriatric ward of Joe?s prison.

Joe has never known his father, who went to prison when Joe was a baby -- what for, I don?t know. But it certainly is statistically more likely that if you go to prison, your children will as well.

Joe learned about the transfer when his father sent a messenger from the geriatric unit asking for tobacco. The man gets breathing treatments twice a day and has a blood clot.

Joe said, ?I?m not sending him tobacco. He?s sick. And what sort of greeting is this to somebody?s son, asking for cigarettes??

The messenger said, ?He?s your dad, man. You should move over to the geriatric unit and be his caregiver. He?s your dad!?

I said to Joe that it sounded like the messenger was talking about his own father, wishing he could take care of him. Joe agreed, but that was really a minor point. All the questions anybody might have about a missing parent were dancing in Joe?s head: Who is this man? What do I want to ask him? Do I care what has become of him? Do I want to tell him who I am, what I have become?

And there are more questions because prison shapes people. Joe wants to know if his father moves with gangsters, takes whatever he can, lies and cheats, blames everyone else for his situation. Or maybe Joe doesn?t want to know the answers to these questions. It?s his father he?s thinking about.

?Why would a father?s first message to his son be a demand for cigarettes?? Joe asked. Mostly, I just listened. I don?t have answers. I understood Joe needed to talk about his fears and dismay to someone safe, not a fellow inmate who could hold his vulnerability against him. By the end of our 20-minute call, Joe told me he?s clear he will visit his father, listening but not giving much of himself or his feelings unless he feels safe.

Joe is a thinking man, trying to grow as a person as he does his time. My own best hope is that his father too is ?square,? a solid citizen, sending out feelers to learn who his son has grown to be. All I can do is listen and hope and pray.

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