

My dear young Carol,

My hope for you is that your will always believe that life is good and you will want to "show up" in your life, be present to people, to your experiences, to God. I had to learn this gradually over the years...and I still don't always "get it" in the moment.

I was a classroom teacher for many years. I loved teaching. Those were happy years. However, with time I became aware of how many people are disadvantaged in life and this disturbed me. I did my best to make my students more aware and awaken in them a desire to stand against injustice. When I was invited to become a part time foster mom for Aboriginal girls who were victims of abuse in their families, I took the opportunity and moved into Megwech House in inner city.

Still, this did not seem to be enough. I knew deep down that God was calling me to something MORE...and yes, dear one, do not be surprised when God invites you, and then accompanies you down roads you would never have dreamed of choosing. Somewhere in the middle of my life this happened to me. A friend called my attention to an advertisement for a chaplain in a medium security prison for men. I applied for the position and was accepted. Each day I entered a world behind barbed wire, a place of anger and fear and hard choices. For the inmates, the chapel was as a place of refuge, and one by one many found their way to my Office. My first of these encounters was surprising and powerful and I want to share it with you.

An inmate appeared at my office door dressed in prison garb and wearing a cap. I invited him to close the door, sit down in a comfortable chair beside me and share some of the experiences that had shaped his life. He then proceeded to speak of a childhood laced with pain and loss, broken relationships, and poverty. I was deeply moved by his vulnerability and trust since I was a comparative stranger. I was also struck by his matter of fact accounting with little emotion. I wanted him to know that God cared and I cared, yet I was hesitant to impose my religious beliefs on. So I closed our interview by asking a permission. "Is it O.K. if I pray for you before you leave?" His answer was an unhesitating YES. He removed his cap, bowed his head. I bowed my head and prayed aloud about the situations he had just shared. He heard the fears and struggles he had just voiced placed in God's Hands with prayers that he would find courage and peace.. Suddenly I noticed dark spots appearing on the pale beige carpet between us. Tears were rolling down his cheeks onto the floor below.

Over time I met with many other prisoners and their responses when I prayed for them were similar. I also became aware that the carpet had become paler in one small area. At the year's end, when a maintenance person arrived to clean the carpet, I asked him about this discoloration. He bent down and rubbed the carpet with his fingers. "Salt", he said. It then dawned on me that with time a circle of salt had accumulated from so many tears shed in exactly the same place. I nearly asked him to NOT clean that portion of my carpet, for this circle of salt, made up of so many tears entrusted to me in the heart of a prison, has come to stand for what I most want to be about as a Sister of the Holy Names.

And so, young Carol, Know that your journey will include precious encounters. Be attentive. Try not to miss a single one as they will help you, as they have helped me, grow in compassion. Through meeting you, others will experience a God who loves them.

Your older self,
Carol (Sr. Carol Peloquin, snjm)

