

Finding Meaning in Our Life

Warrior of Light - Part 2

One of the worst sufferings in life is to find no meaning in our life. When this happens, one begins to ask the questions: "Why go on living? What is the purpose of my life?"

On Wednesday, before I left a unit at Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall at Sylmar, the senior staff member said, "Fr. Mike, I am having a real hard time dealing with the death sentences these kids are being handed out."

A few moments before I had just spoken with José, a youngster, who, with tears in his eyes, shared, "I have wasted my life." I asked him if he thought he had ever had a chance in life, and he smiled and said, "Not really. Ever since I was little, I looked up to my brother. I saw how the gangster lifestyle brought him so many things: drugs, girls, and money. There was no other way for me. This lifestyle was dealt to me. Did I know anything different? No. I have never been out of Los Angeles except here - to Sylmar in the valley."

Many mornings I watch the young college rowing crew of Loyola Marymount University (LMU), who are probably the same age as José. Their fathers could be doctors, lawyers, and perhaps even district attorneys, who receive a salary to give youth, like José, a sentence to die in prison. Now, you can't really say these kids were never given a choice, but I wonder what would have happened to one of the crew members, if he had traded places with José ten years ago? We don't like to ask such a question, because it forces us to realize how we can be so punitive to kids who were never given a real choice: abuse, drugs, no father, a step-father, domestic violence.

It is hard to look into a mirror and see how we have changed. All we really know is this moment. However, when I visited Eric Benites recently through a two-way mirror at Salinas Valley State Prison, I could see how, in just a few short months, his journey of faith had changed him. Before, while using drugs, he looked unfocused; now he looked centered.

When Javier told me that guys in the units at Sylmar make fun of him for being a Warrior of Light, I thought, go ahead and make fun of Javier all you want. Of course, the choice to change makes people uncomfortable. If your life is about a way of death, then of course you try to do all you can to extinguish the light.

Eric, the first Warrior of Light, brought pride to Sylmar as he sat before me, speaking of his life as a warrior of light in prison. He meets with a brother every day and prays. When you are 18, you are not normally ready to give your life to God. So often, the first half of life is about proving oneself, family, success, and status. Yet, as I observed Eric facing a life being locked up, I saw the example of a modern monk starting religious life early at 18 years old.

How does Eric find meaning with a sentence of 50 years to life? The spiritual movements were so strong that Eric conveyed how he found meaning in his life. In that moment, the power of intercessory prayer became so clear, that I gave him a special request for the health of a friend, who has made our work possible.

In the dark place of prison, many find relief in heroine. Since there is no meaning in their lives it is easier to be numb and dead to the pain, rather than look into the face of despair and

desperation.

Listening to Eric speak about God and how he is now a different person, I felt like that senior staff member at Sylmar. Why can't we give our kids a second chance? Why can't we realize that forgiveness is the key to finding real peace? How instrumental would it be to have someone like Eric give meaning to the lives of kids-at-risk?

It has now been a while since Eric wrote the prayer "Warrior of Light," and signed his name in the Book of Life that denotes the commitment to this journey. Signing the Book of Life is not about death but about claiming back your real life. So let the kids at Sylmar make fun of Javier. If they had spent that hour and a half with Eric at Salinas Valley State Prison, they would stop ridiculing and laughing at Javier. They would be on their knees realizing that the lifestyle, in which they're stuck, is not really helping them. Unfortunately, they still don't know anything different from gangbanging. On their knees, they would be asking their families and loved ones for forgiveness for the foolishness in making the choices to ruin their lives.