

“Remembering the presence of mystery at California Correctional Institution at Tehachapi”

I remember my shoulders very close to the two cages; my left shoulder almost touching Antonio's cage, my right shoulder almost touching Luis' cage.

I remember looking down and seeing the battery-powered, vanilla scented fake candle I had placed on the floor between the two cages.

I remember the concrete wall between the cages, the bolts holding them to the wall, and the cobwebs draped between the wall and the metal grate of the cages.

I remember being able to fit only my little finger through the openings of the metal grate.

I remember the confusion when my eyes played tricks on me as I tried to focus on Antonio's face as the grate seemed to move.

I remember the men's hands as they placed them against the metal grate as I tried to get as much oil as possible on the small places of their hands I was able to touch.

I remember them each rubbing the oil into their hands and breathing in its scent, knowing how much the scent would mean to them in their world with so little to feed their senses.

I remember the tears welling up in the eyes of Luis as he read of leaving his grandmother in Mexico at the age of twelve and not writing to her as he had promised. I remember the smiles as he recalled the way she embraced him and how much she loved him.

I remember Antonio describing his mother and how she cared for him and his eleven brothers and sisters and the feeling of her dying at that very moment miles away.

I remember Antonio describing his memories of his father and his father's illness and death, along with the pain and anger that came with that experience and the heroin used to numb the hurt.

I remember each of them reading letters they wrote to their younger selves; letters of encouragement and full of love, compassion, and forgiveness.

I remember the moment I got it...that each of these men really has a glimpse of God's love, and that each of them are gifted with hope and a sense of being beloved.

I remember the feeling of being exactly where I was meant to be and the overwhelming sense of being in the presence of mystery.

Mary Ellen Burton

November 13, 2010