

Jericho Circle

A Contemplative Exercise by Rev. Fred Small
First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist
New Year's Vespers
January 1, 2012

Some of you know that Carol Agate and I visit a man named Fred Clay at Bay State Correctional Center in Norfolk. Fred is serving a sentence of life without parole for the 1979 robbery and murder of a Boston cab driver. Fred was 16 years old when the crimes were committed. He's now 48 years old and has been incarcerated for 32 years—two thirds of his life.

Fred insists he is innocent of the murder, that he was not involved in the robbery. Having spent a lot of time with him over the last decade and a half, I've come to believe him.

Whatever challenges each of us may face this New Year's Day, imagine for a moment what it would be like to be imprisoned for the rest of your life for a crime you did not commit.

Unlike some others in prison, Fred has not found religion. He is not a Christian nor a Muslim. He has cultivated his own wisdom in the bleakness of his circumstances.

While in prison, Fred has participated in the Jericho Circle Project, which seeks to bring self-discovery and emotional growth to convicts and former convicts in Massachusetts.

Fred told me about the time a Jericho Circle was preparing to say goodbye to an inmate about to be released after nearly thirty years in prison. They asked him two questions:

What will have to die in you for you to be free?

What will have to be reborn in you for you to remain free?

These are questions of special power and importance, of course, for a prisoner about to be released. But all of us are imprisoned one way or another—either behind bars and walls or within the confinement of our own prejudices, assumptions, grudges, tribes—even our most cherished beliefs.

And so as we look ahead into this bright new year of 2012, I invite each of us to contemplate these same questions for just a few moments. I'll ask each question and then sound the gong to open and close the silence.

What will have to die in you for you to be free?

What will have to be reborn in you for you to remain free?

Amen and Blessed Be.