



Overdue

*Winner of the most ironic overdue notice sent from my library:
“The book you checked out from the Facility D Library, entitled
‘Personal Responsibility,’ is now thirty days overdue.”*

In most libraries, an overdue book is not a major deal. Patrons might have their borrowing privileges curtailed until the book is returned, owe a fine, or even pay to replace the lost volume. The first time I sent out overdue notices through the institutional mail for my library, however, the consequences were unforeseen (by me) and immediate. Inmates who had not returned their books in a timely manner were called into the sergeant’s office, verbally reprimanded for causing trouble in the library, and then subjected to a locker search. Locker searches are brutal because, depending on who is conducting them, an inmate might find all of his belongings flung around his cell and covered in the remnants of his precious food supply. This can mean hot sauce stuck on photos, instant coffee wetly staining legal papers, books ripped apart, stationery ruined, clothing soiled, snacks no longer edible, a soggy mess of intentional destruction. And, for good measure, the lockers of the men living on either side of the targeted inmate also get hit, so the guy who messed up is left with nothing but a bunk full of chaos and the simmering resentment of his dorm neighbors.

After that spate of incidents, which I heard about in living color the next day, I changed our policy. Rather than mailing

them, I gave the overdue notices to Earl to deliver in person, quietly, under the disciplinary radar. Earl apparently delivered these notices with such a threatening countenance that the books he sought surfaced almost immediately. Earl enjoyed putting the fear of God into disrespectful book borrowers. He would have been a success in a collections department.

The overdue notices taught me, once again, that the things I considered no big deal could be a huge deal in prison. I couldn't bring in hand sanitizer, because the alcohol content made it an attractive drink. I couldn't pack my lunch of leftovers in a glass dish, because broken glass can cut things, like throats. I couldn't display family photos on my desk, as those dear faces might beckon to stalkers. I couldn't forget to stow my cell phone in my car, because a staff member caught with a cell phone on the yard could be charged with a misdemeanor and lose a percentage of pay. I couldn't wear anything blue, or I might be mistaken for an inmate during an incident. And I learned time and again that the biggest deal of all in prison was "respect."

In prison, respect is the coin of the realm. The library ran smoothly when it ran on mutual respect. I was a pretty good boss, but the bar is low in prison: one of my clerks told me that he liked working in the library because "you treat us like people." Treating people like people seems like a no-brainer to me, but that is the essence of respect.

Respect is all that is left when a person's dignity is methodically stripped down to nothing. An inmate has no personal space, no privacy, no power, no voice in anything that happens to him, but he can command and give respect. If any word or deed is tinged with the slightest "disrespect," all hell could break loose. Many dialogues start with, "No disrespect, but . . ."

The literal meaning of "respect" is "to take a second look." Every word in prison is second-guessed, mulled over, dissected.

This is possibly due to the fact that people have a lot of free time when they are incarcerated. With a surfeit of time, molehills can become mountains. Respect is universally desired; disrespect is hunted, ferreted out. Sometimes I caught a thieving patron hiding a magazine in his pocket or trying to smuggle a book out of the library, a blatant act of disrespect that, for my own credibility, I had to write up as a rules infraction. “Bunch of crooks around here,” I’d mutter to my clerks, which made them laugh, but they knew: Disrespect must not stand.

Mailing the overdue notices was disrespectful on my part, but keeping a book past its due date was disrespecting the library. In prison-think, I guessed we were even.

“Overdue” appears in the book *Overdue: A Dewey Decimal System of Grace* by Valerie Schultz. © 2019 by Valerie Schultz. Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved.

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