

The Ventilation System

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Here in California inside most prison cells right above the sink is a ventilation system that us prisoners label a “vent”. In this vent is our lifeline for communication with the neighboring cells housing other prisoners. Through this vent we can talk to others and pass along needed information. We speak through these vents to learn, listen and socialize. Its the go-to place. As soon as you enter a new cell you are housed in and introduce yourself to your neighbors. It's a place individuals create friends or sometimes even foes. In this mecca of the prison social network you can hear laughter and jokes or sometimes screams, cries and threats, violence exploding between cell mates, their sanity no longer contained.

I've heard many languages through these vents: Nahuatl, Scandinavian, Swahili, Arabic, Tagalog, Spanish and more. I've heard the Islamic call to prayer, I've heard demonic incantations, opposing worlds coexisting alongside my poetry I was creating to block out the noise of quarrelsome neighbors suffering schizophrenic episodes, banging on their doors. I've smelled incense burning and marijuana. I've smelled feces and a burning mattress. On the worst days I've choked on pepper spray.

Us prisoners learn life lessons on a daily basis. Some individuals use their wisdom and never talk on the vents because maybe their conversation was recorded or someone reported their confessions of a crime through a Perkins operation. This vent has stopped many prisoners from hanging themselves because they were able to talk out their problems with me or their neighbors, or their life was saved because they fell down and went unresponsive and other prisoners were able to holler “Man down!” so the officers could hear about a crisis and call the ambulance, just in time.

We exercise with one another. The cadence could be heard through the vent. We've made love connections and blew kisses to our soulmates, they know who they are. But at the same time, it's no secret, because everyone's listening to the vent.

California's ventilation system is a place for social equality, mental health wellness, cognitive behavioral therapy, legal work, politics, economical growth, physical fitness, religion, sexual identity, LGBTQ rights, prison reform, spirituality, and just to tell a few jokes or just doing nothing more than venting through the vents.

The ventilation system is a necessity for the cell you're housed in, whether for social reasons or for air conditioning to breath and to also to dry your clothes.

Welcome to the vent, the network system that connects you and I. Hear the stories, feel the emotions, see the pictures, here and now.

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