

THE PRISON & THE DANDELIN

By Andrew D. Olsen

As a missionary, I learned to face difficulties with hope and faith instead of becoming a prisoner of discouragement.

These are the areas I'll be assigning you to," our mission president said when he met his three newest elders. I felt excited about the first two places he mentioned but reluctant about the third. It was a town with four prisons. Later that day, I felt somewhat relieved when I was assigned to one of the other areas. This reprieve was only temporary, however, as I was transferred to that town several months later.

I arrived by bus on a bitterly cold January night. A ward member brought my companion to pick me up, then drove us to an old house that had been divided into apartments. Missionaries often live in humble dwellings, but this was unlike any I'd seen before. "I haven't let my bare feet touch the floor since I got here," my companion said.

I soon learned why. Parts of the floor were spongy with decay. Not to be outdone, the ceiling sagged ominously. Wallpaper was peeling off the walls. Leaky radiators were hissing. When I opened the old latch-style fridge, I saw two boxes of breakfast cereal. "That's how we keep out the cockroaches," my companion explained. I was sure that those who said there were only four prisons in town had miscounted.



During the next few weeks, almost everything seemed to go against us. Despite working hard, we found very few people to teach. Of those we were teaching, two or three moved out of town. Adding to our difficulty was the worst winter anyone could remember. Icicles from our roof were five feet long. I defaulted to discouragement.

Apparently I expressed some of these struggles in my letters to family and friends. In response, I received a letter that breathed spring into my winter. “Bloom where you’re planted,” it said. This phrase helped me realize that I couldn’t blame adverse circumstances for the prison walls I felt rising around me. Instead, I was building the town’s newest prison with my own attitude.

Seeking a change of heart and mind, I turned to the Book of Mormon. I began to see spiritual parallels between my situation and the many accounts of people being freed from prison and other bondage. For example, as Alma and Amulek prayed for deliverance, “they broke the cords with which they were bound” (see Alma 14:26–29). And when Helaman’s sons Nephi and Lehi were cast into prison, the power of God freed them (see Helaman 5:20–49). I didn’t need anything so dramatic. All I needed was some hope and some guidance—I found both in abundance.

I also had an unexpected accomplice in my prison break: a dandelion. Before my mission, I spent a summer doing lawn care, and dandelions had been my enemy. One morning in the mission field, I walked outside and made peace. Surrounded by patches of late snow was a single dandelion. Instead of blooming in rich soil, it shone radiantly from a crack in the sidewalk. “Bloom where you’re planted,” I thought, surprised to find myself admiring the very flower I’d held in contempt.

Because of the dandelion’s ability to thrive in almost any environment, I adopted it as a symbol to help me do the same. Gradually I stopped letting difficult conditions control my outlook. I came to recognize the irony that in this place where so many people were forcibly denied their freedom, I had been surrendering the most fundamental freedom—the power to choose my

response to my circumstances—without much of a fight.

My missionary journal shows a remarkable change. My negative outlook had been self-fulfilling. As I developed positive expectations, they also became self-fulfilling. My pleadings changed from silently hoping I wouldn’t be sentenced to that area to openly asking to stay. “I love these people,” I wrote repeatedly, and “I love this place.”

Soon I saw a connection between my field of labor and these words of the Lord from the Doctrine and Covenants: “I have much people in this place, . . . and an effectual door shall be opened” (D&C 100:3). Through some of the doors that were opened, the blessings of the gospel are now extending into new generations and even into other nations.

I also saw a connection between the town where I was serving and these similar words of the Lord: “I have . . . many people in this city, whom I will gather out in due time . . . through your instrumentality” (D&C 111:2). To me, this scripture suggested that in some small way, the Lord’s work in that town depended on the missionaries being good instruments. My earlier attitude had limited my potential as such an instrument. Changing my attitude did much more than improve my personal capacity; it also made me a better instrument for the Lord to work through.

The town I once hoped to avoid continues to bless my life more than 30 years after my reluctant departure. To this day, I cherish the friendships. And I still benefit from the discovery that I can choose to bloom wherever I am planted, whenever the season, whatever the challenges. As life progresses and greater challenges arise, the prison and the dandelion still face off against each other from time to time. But before I get very far with my concrete and razor wire, I summon this experience as a missionary, and the prison walls collapse.

“Behold, he did deliver them because they did humble themselves before him; and because they cried mightily unto him he did deliver them out of bondage; and thus doth the Lord work with his power in all cases among the children of men, extending the arm of mercy towards them that put their trust in him” (Mosiah 29:20). ■