

Studying behind bars

By Safia Siddiqui

Edu-Prisoners

EVERYBODY has a story to tell, not many years ago people use to gather in the evening to share their stories. One cannot forget our dear old grandmothers gathering young souls around the fireplace, telling the same old story for the umpteenth time. As a child I remember my late father Prof Muhammad Kamil telling me true stories of brave and gallant men and women standing against all odds and achieving the impossible.

Like so many other things today, we are also losing the tradition of reading and telling tales and despite the awesome powers of technology our youth is missing an essential element in life. Believe me story telling is not a matter of passing time rather it is a way to pass along wisdom, the right stuff that helps us live a life worth remembering.

One such true story titled "From the death cell" was published in *Dawn* sometime back (July 15, 2007). It was written by Mr Fida Hussain from Central Prison Haripur. Implicated in a blind murder case, he has been in jail for the past five years. At the time of his arrest he had just done his matriculation. As a young man he was full of faith for the course of justice as he thought himself innocent. But days changed into months and months into years without significant progress in the legal course.

Usually people spending years in jail lose not only hope but also the will to live and their visions are disillusioned but Mr Fida showed unprecedented courage. His interaction with the criminals and the grim setting of the jail did not deter him from his prime aim - seeking education.

The jail for him proved to be a collage as he first did his intermediate and then his death cell turned into a university from where he got a bachelors degree in political science and law. But he did not stop there and kept on pursuing education to earn a masters degree in international relations while even managing to secure the sev-

enth position in Hazara University.

This true story should be an inspiration for our youth as it shows how an ordinary man with extraordinary will and determination can make the most out of his circumstances and end up being called a real hero. The feat completed by Mr Fida is surely unmatched but there must be others too lingering somewhere in jails doing the same. We have the example set by our Holy Prophet (PBUH) in dealing with the prisoners who would educate other illiterate prisoners to be pardoned after some time for their services. After all teaching and acquiring knowledge is the dearest thing in Islam.

"Men are not dependent on circumstances but circumstances on men" carries great wisdom when we look at the life of Nelson Mandela whose years in jail made him a symbol of human rights and an author of a moving autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, which he started writing secretly in prison.

Similarly Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto wrote the emotional book *If I am Assassinated* from his death cell. A long list of these inspirational stories includes Gandhi, Maulana Muhammad Ali, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Habib Jalib and many more. But then they all were people with extraordinary qualities while the example I am trying to emphasize is that of one ordinary man.

What is unique about this true story is that it clearly proves that seeking education is a matter of prospective about how you look at things and how you react to them. If two people look out of the jail bars, one may see mud on the ground while the other may focus on the stars shining brightly high up in the sky.

Very few people have this special gift of optimism which helps them lead a happy and content life. The secret is to look at things with a positive frame of mind as self pity takes us no where. The more miserable you feel the more afflicted you end up. Everyone has at least one driving force which makes them carry on no matter what. ■