

COZY'S STORY

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At last night's session, Cordova, who is called Cozy, said he had a stress and concern but it would require a little story.

When he first came to Downstate, some other Dominicans told him how to handle himself in the rules and rhythms of this particular inmate culture. It's the practice that most new men get orientated usually by their own people as to how the prison operates, which officers to watch out for, and which inmates they should steer away from because of their crime or because they are not trustworthy. Cozy was told that a certain man, another Dominican, was not to be respected. He, however, did not get any specifics as to why he was not to respect this man. A week or two ago, Cozy told the group that he had had the opportunity to counsel a new man, and he repeated what he had been told about this other Dominican guy, now five years ago.

A few days later this same new man came back to Cozy to say that he went to this guy he was told to steer clear of because he wanted to personally check the guy out. He said that what he had learned from Cozy about this man wasn't true., possibly because he had seen the man's court papers.

Group-think is a powerful reality in prison, whether it is peer pressure or the rumor mill. Moreover, many of the men often do not question rumors or feel responsible for them, even if they suspect they are not true, and then they pass them on. In a prison environment, where repeated rumors and gossip cannot be verified or checked, they can have a convincing and punishing air about them. Mao Zedong said if ten people believe a lie, then it is true, underscoring that the authority of propaganda and rumor rests in just how many people believe it or repeat it.

Your reputation, therefore, is important. If what is said about you is wrong or not true, even if it is only hearsay, it can be a matter of honor and even violence, especially if you are being called a rat or a snitch. However, if it concerns your crime in particular, say someone claims you are here because of sexual offense against a minor and it is not true, no one has to just take your word for it. You can show them your court papers to prove otherwise. In this case, it never occurred to Cozy to challenge the truth of what he had been told about this other man. Too many of his own people, the Dominicans, had said the same thing.

Yet now, when he learned otherwise, Cozy said he felt ashamed that he had participated in the rumor and passed it on to others. He thanked the new man for what he had done and for coming back to him with the correct story. To our group, he said he had felt honor-bound to go to the defamed man to apologize and then go to everyone to whom he had spoken of this man to tell them the truth. And he had done so.

Cozy was embarrassed that he had falsely damaged the man's reputation because he himself is so adamant about protecting his own. Many months earlier in group he had said that his whole family was fierce about maintaining its reputation and that you were expected to fight for it. Literally! "You just can't let that stuff go without dealing with it. Your reputation is always worth fighting for." Cozy is a big man, maybe 6'2" and about 230 lbs. When he talks about fighting someone, you can feel from his eyes that he is not speaking lightly.

After telling us his story, Cozy said that the man in question just happened to be in the A.R.T. class in the very next room and asked us if it would be okay to bring him into our room. We were all a little surprised but saw no reason to say no.

He was back in a minute with "Keith", a man maybe a head shorter than Cozy, looking a bit bewildered, not sure what this was all about. Cozy promptly repeated what he had told us, shook Keith's hand and apologized again. Keith said nothing, but smiled tentatively. In another second, he left the room without saying a word. It was all done in a great rush.

Cozy may have done this not so much to prove to us that what he said was true but to let Keith know that he had done what he had promised Keith he would do. The entire group praised Cozy.

The conversation then turned to how we all participate in this profiling of others, believing the pejorative information we've heard about them from others, not asking ourselves why this would be true of these particular people.