

Lester L. Polk
“Liberation”

When I first arrived in prison, I somehow kept expecting that an alarm would go off and awaken me from this surreal nightmare, that “d be able to tell my fiancée Vicki that I had had a horrible dream where I was taken away from her and locked in a cage.

Yet day after day, I woke up and saw not the pewter eyes of my teenage love, but the drab painted walls of the cell that became my expatriate dwelling for what would be the remainder of my life.

As time passed, I found myself in a quandary: should I become one of those around me- a convict who accepted this environment as his life and choose it is more over societies?

Alternatively, should I attempt to retain the Lester that I was before the infamous ride of a night that left a man dead and his wife and daughter brutalized?

I chose the latter. So with the typical care of a fish out of water, I stayed close to the wall and tried not to make a fool of myself as I frantically held on to what humanity I still had with a vise-like grip.

Yet, no matter how hard I tried, I concluded that for a man bearing the weight of a life sentence, holding on to the vestiges of his existence in the free world is like trying to catch the wind.

After the first decade or so of incarceration, I though like a convict. I would get a 32-cent an hour job and a girlfriend to send me care packages and maybe sneak in a cuddle or two during visits. Still, I was focused enough to avoid the common prison fare of gangs, drugs, violence, and anarchy, mostly because I had a few encounters with violence. Each had proved more destructive than the slow death sentence I was already subjected to.

Yet, I could not see taking my last breath behind bars. After taking the obligatory trip to the law library and jailhouse lawyers beat me of my money, I realized that it would take a miracle to get out from under life without parole.

Therefore, I tried a tactic born of desperation- I prayed. I had been brought up in the church and I remembered one verse from Sunday school- “And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” John 8:32. I figured that if I prayed enough and was good enough, I would find truth and it would set me free.

I leaned into it hard because I wanted Jesus’s help- bad. I went about it like a college course, treating the Bible as required reading and worship services as required classes. My conduct began to change. I became a good Christian man, a soldier for Jesus. Yet, I still was not whole. I did not experience the cleansing power that preachers talked about so often. I still felt hollow. Then one day, I had an epiphany. In order to go forward, I had to go backward, back to the night where I lost my moral compass and sense of decency. However, I could not do it. I had worked hard to get rid of that Lester. He was a monstrosity who had emerged only once in my lifetime, but he had ruined lives. I no longer knew him and I certainly did not want to revisit him.

Like a secret agent, I had always had a cover story- I had gone along for a robbery and it went horribly wrong, I was just “an accessory to an accidental homicide.” However, that was only half of the truth. While I had no criminal background, I was not just an accessory in the course of events. I was an anger-propelled catalyst of them.

I was fueled by the rage of perceived injustice against me, a rage that I had been holding inside for years. That fateful night, I was in a position of total control over others, and I lost grip of reality, compassion and goodness. Even as I write these words, it is still hard for me to speak

frankly about what I did. I was a black man fulfilling an old stereotype, robbing a white family in their home, yelling racial epithets with an ungodly blood lust that had been building like a volcano for years.

For forty-eight minutes, I terrorized the family whose home I invaded. It only ended when I threatened the sanctity of the teenage daughter, and the father heroically intervened by attacking me. My co-defendant wrestled him down and shot him in the back. We fled.

I ran from these facts for nearly a decade. The idea of going back to that night gnawed at me. One of my Christian brothers suggested I write to the widow and her daughter. Therefore, I did. In a bland but heartfelt letter, I admitted my wrongs and expressed sorrow. In addition, I was proud of myself. I had done my Christian duty. I had made amends.

When I received no response, I was relieved. If they didn't want to address the pain, who was I to peel off the scab? Therefore, I ran back to my cover story. For eight more years, I lived with the overwhelming shame and relentless burden of my detestable actions.

One day, unexpectedly, I received a letter from the widow. She asked if I was okay, if I had ever heard of "restorative justice," and if I wanted to do a "mediation." I had only vaguely heard of such a program. I was intrigued, but reluctant. How could I ever sit in front of her and talk about what I had done to her and her family? She kept writing to me. She did not want to yell, she said, she just wanted answers. I warmed to the idea, but it did not happen and that was fine by me.

Two years later, I received a call from the Office of Victim Services in Sacramento. My victim had requested a mediation with me and a trained mediator would prepare me for the meeting. I was taken aback. A mediation was one thing in theory, to go through with it was an entirely different matter. However, I also knew this was the hand of God and I would regret it if I passed up this opportunity.

In my first meeting with the mediator, I encountered a small, demure woman who possessed a gentle kindness that enabled me to drop my cover story and face the full extent of the painful destruction I had caused. Subsequent meetings helped me recognize that although I could not fully fathom the evil I had done, I did indeed do it. No amount of denial could shield me from that fact. As I began to own my actions, I was able to empathize with the family. I saw the infinite number of ripples the stone of my selfishness had caused. As that happened, I became eager to get well. I had to. I did not want to meet the widow with my old issues lingering.

I tore into every rehabilitative class that was offered, especially group therapy. I was embarrassingly honest and made myself emotionally naked. Feelings flooded me, repressed memories, old anxieties, secret fears all with deluges of incessant tears. In prison, a world full of predators, displays of such emotions are not generally done. They make you vulnerable-and a potential victim. However, I could not have stopped even if I had wanted to. It poured out of me. Anxiously sitting in the foyer of the visiting room, I knew that nothing would be the same after that day. "Okay Lester, we're going in there now. Let me know if you'd like a break or if it becomes too intense for you," the mediator said.

I walked in. I had been in the same room many times, but always with a supporter, never to face the fear I had been running from for twenty years. My therapist and the survivor, as I now called her in order to truly pay tribute to what she had gone through, stood in front of me. The survivor did something I did not expect. She held out her hand for me to shake. It was quite a different reception than the last time we had met, in a courtroom. I earnestly shook her hand and we all sat.

The survivor spoke first. "What led you to be in my home that evening?" she said in a determined tone, like a reporter who had a lead on a story and was not going to leave without it. "Well, I had been involved with a group of people, who I wouldn't call friends, and they were making a great deal of money from robberies. I told them I wanted to join in, but they were actually looking for another person I knew to join them. I was not part of their 'crew.' I was really an outsider who vaguely knew of their activities.

The survivor looked intensely into my eyes as if trying to ascertain whether I was lying. I continued, explaining how her house was chosen.

"Say that again. Do you mean to tell me that it was by chance that my home was selected?" I answered in the affirmative. Our faulty logic deemed that a safe containing thousands of dollars was in the house and we did not believe the victims' claims that they had no safe. Our unwritten rule was to never leave a robbery empty-handed.

This information was met with stoic silence. The meeting was getting quite intense. I looked for the exit. My therapist gave me a reassuring nod. I continued. "Can I read a letter that I wrote to you as part of my therapy? It is called 'victims shoes'. It's written as if you were writing to me about the trauma that my actions caused." She nodded.

The letter was filled with insight about the pain and turmoil that my actions had caused. I looked intently at the paper as I read. I did not feel worthy of looking at the survivor. When I finished, I found the strength to look up, to my surprise, tears filled her eyes.

"You get it, you really do get it! I just wanted to know if you understood. Now I know you do. That means so much to me."

"I just wanted to let you know that I am so sorry. I can only express to you that I have spent my life trying to be the exact opposite of what you experienced that horrible night. I can only beg you to find it in your heart to forgive me."

"We all need forgiveness, Lester. We are all sinners. If there were something that I could point to in my life that would make me more 'right' in God's sight than anyone else, then I would not have needed Jesus. We are equal."

Those words punched me hard. Did I hear her right? Did she just say that I, of all people, was equal to her? Forgiveness is what I had longed for over the past twenty years in order to regain my humanity. The survivor had just given me that gift, the gift of relief. Still, I was puzzled.

"How can we be equal? I just wanted to do my penance and let you know that I was sorry. I never thought we could be equal."

"Of course, we are equal. The Lord Jesus would have it no other way. I mean it, and I would like to offer you my friendship."

"Your friendship? What do you mean?"

"Just that. I would like us to get to know one another. I think that is the natural ending to this. We might as well be friends now because we will be in eternity forever in heaven. This is what the Lord would want of us. In this life, tragedies happen to us, but what we do with them is the true test."

After a few moments of confused contemplation, I answered. "Yes, I will be your friend. I consider your friendship a gift of God and I will do my absolute best to be the best friend I can possibly be."

The meeting continued, but without the feeling of heaviness that had first permeated it as we talked about life as two equal human beings. The visit concluded hours later when I had to leave for court. I stood, prepared to shake my new friend's hand. She again surprised me, by shoving

my hand out of the way and hugging me. “This is what freedom feels like” I thought as she squeezed me tightly in a hug that seemed reserved only for family.

As I lined up to return to my building, fellow prisoners noticed a glow about me. I was beaming. I told them about an awesome experience I had just had and the wonderful gift of friendship that had been offered to me. They were amazed. Their collective experience with survivors had consisted only of tear-filled, emotion driven impact statements given to the court that included angry, bitter diatribes such as “I hope you rot in hell” and “Prison is too good for you.” However, my experience had brought an unheard of bright light to this dark place. My prayers for forgiveness had been at long answered. The survivor’s gracious act caused me to come from a place of shadowy self-hatred to the light of wholeness. This was my freedom and I intended to be worthy of it.

A few weeks later, I received a letter from my new friend, who told me how liberated she felt after our visit, how that for years her only remembrance of me was of a bitter, angry, violent young man. This had now been replaced by the image of a well-adjusted man thoroughly repentant for the damage he had caused and eager to foster a healing in any way he could. “I came to confront the past and found a friend,” she wrote.

I cherished her friendship as the only genuine thing in my existence, so much, so that when tragedy struck my own family, I reached out to her, my friend.

The news hit on a weekend. While preparing to go to breakfast, I was summoned to the administration office. “This can’t be good.” I thought. It was not. My baby brother had been murdered for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It took all of my strength to make it back to my 6 x 9 cell. I fell to the floor and a wail escaped me, a cry that did not sound close to human. Now I clawed with the dark, painful experience of despair, loss, anger and desire for justice. Now I understood that anger was the weapon of those who are hurt. I wanted vengeance against my brother’s murderer. Then I remembered a look that my friend’s oldest daughter had given me in the courtroom. A look fueled with the same justifiable rage that I now possessed. I knew I had to relinquish my feelings of vengeance, just as my friend had done with me. How could I deny someone the precious gift that I had been freely given?

I wrote my friend, my fellow survivor, who told me that the pain would eventually become manageable, even though it would never fully go away. My friend even called my mother on the day of the funeral to give her words of encouragement to help her through that trying time.

As she said it would, the pain of my loss subsided as time passed, and I continued my journey for wholeness. Forgiveness was difficult but necessary for my growth. As hard as it was to let go of the anger, it felt good to be like my friend, free and forgiving.

A few weeks later, I received a letter from my friend with a photo of her daughter who I had harmed in an unspeakable way. She was smiling. In our previous correspondence, my friend had been very candid in the descriptions of her daughter’s turmoil, a direct result of my actions. Although this would previously have given rise to feelings of great shame, now it did my heart proud to see her in a moment of joy and to hear of her stellar accomplishments. As tears welled up in my eyes, everything seemed to come together. Seeing her pick up the shattered pieces of her life and forgive them into a masterpiece relieved me of an unbearable weight. While nothing relieved me of my responsibility of my grievous actions, one woman’s choice to forgive set me free.

