

## MY SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION

by  
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Next September will mark my 20<sup>th</sup> year in jail. It is not an anniversary I'm particularly proud of. I was convicted of murder and hopelessly sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

When I arrived at the infamous Pelican Bay Prison, I was shocked right out of my criminal-minded circuit if stupidity. The flow of in-house narcotics profits didn't appeal to me anymore. My drug-dealing days had already brought me to terrestrial hell.

Like the majority of prisoners on the yard, I just wanted to do my time as trouble-free as possible. I simply wanted to build on the better part of me, redeem whatever part of me was possible. As the cycle of drug abuse, negative peer pressure, and unfettered rebellion roiled around my years of confinement, I began to long for something better. I wanted to be productive, do something better.

That desire to build on the better part of me swelled, but with little comfort and no outlet. With fervent disillusion, I came to see the California Department of Corrections (CDC) as nothing more than an empty shell. It's a colossal department with two overriding modes of operation: 1) behavior control with a heavy stick as its main prod; and 2) the fostering of survival of the fittest, thus encouraging a cut-throat atmosphere of criminal cronyism. In other words, if you don't join a clique, you could be swallowed up as a loner in the predatory food chain.

Scarce are the rewards for positive behavior, especially for lifers. Still, I managed to remain disciplinary free for fourteen consecutive years (dodging the racism, prison-styled hazing, and violent clique initiations), in spite of the pervasive violence, negativity, and hopelessness.

Ironically, it wasn't until I found myself in trouble (for being too friendly with a nurse), that I was transferred to the state prison in Los Angeles County, host of the Prison Honor Program. Suddenly, my lack of cognitive stimulation and productively was turned on its head. There was such a wide array of self-help opportunities to choose from, I didn't know where to start: yoga, creative writing, critical thinking, painting, and many other classes and activities.

I also experienced a different type of peer pressure. My first day out, I was approached by a succession of other prisoners, echoing the same guidance as the first guy: "We don't bang here; we don't play {prison} politics, racial or any other kind; and we respect everyone, including the guards." That speech has been an indelible part of my daily living for the past sixteen years.

I later learned that the program was initiated in 2000 by other reform-minded prisoners. Prisoners who also had an avid desire for inner growth and change. With staff, peer-instructed classes were allowed, using inherent individual talents to sharpen the masses.

To my amazement, not a single class was racially segregated. Everyone interacts and we've come to understand one another better. On the yard, all races play and exercise together, a freakish sight after years of being programmed the other way. Graffiti is nowhere to be found, replaced instead by colorful, creative murals and other works of art.

Since I've been here, racial riots, work stoppages, and the wide range of other wickedness are all memories of the past. I believe this is the only facility in the states that can make such a positive claim.

The success of the Honor Program cannot be denied. According to a study conducted by prison staff, the Honor Program saved the CDC (and taxpayers) more than \$200,000 in its first year alone. Meanwhile, weapons infractions decreased 88 percent, and violence and threatening

behavior dropped 85 percent.

In a state that features one of the nation's highest recidivism rates – two thirds if California's offenders return to prison within three years – such tangible evidence of behavioral correction is welcome indeed. The secret to this is that it is a completely volunteer program. To our dismay, our success has earned only partial and consistent support from the institution and past secretaries of the department at headquarters in Sacramento.

Sadly, there is still a school of thought that doesn't believe in incentive-based programs or rehabilitation. For members of this camp, continuation of the failed model is sufficient. They want the stick and nothing but the stick. Unfortunately, the violence, deaths, and costly court interventions don't help them see the light.

My hope is that society sees the light and demands life-changing transformation, rather than simply warehousing misery and making human beings subsist the shadows of the dark ages – only to be released back into a neighborhood near you.