

**MOVING TOWARD CHANGE:
PEACE, EMPATHY & HEALING**

by
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Imagine a circuitous cesspool rotating roundabout such that its self-propelling momentum forms an eye right smack in its center. Now imagine yourself above, on the cliff of life, and without knowing exactly why, you jump head first into the cesspool.

Just as you imagined, the experience leaves a bad taste in your mouth, the sights frightening, the experience dizzying. As you acclimate, you begin to see the reality of the situation. Your imagination slows from hyper drive. The fear that plays on your mind recedes. Beyond the cesspool of media hype is a microcosm of larger society, where some damaged men swim aimlessness through life with no direction, no people skills and no coping mechanisms. Those in their immediate surroundings become their collateral damage, they are the shadows, the zombies that populate most California facilities.

Swimming upward against the tide of ignorance are the few liquid seeds that aim to penetrate, plant and fertilize a new way of thinking and perceiving. My journey began by mentally shedding the false narrative that prison is a dog-eat-dog world where the fittest survive and everyone else is either mulched in the grinder of might, or punked into pink panties and demasculated.

Like any place in larger society, the halls of Congress, corporate boardrooms, retail services or sports fields, predatory personalities will take advantage. Its about respect, an earned social attribute that comes with time and testing.

In prison I have been tested: I refused to join the gangs. I was tested: I refused to pass or deal drugs. I was tested: I refused to be controlled. I earned my respect; I walked the walk of my convictions.

My biggest guiding point was listening. Listening to gossipers, snakes and connivers. They quickly reveal themselves; they are the bad examples, the ones to avoid. Just as those on the path stand out with their stimulating, thought-provoking and even educational conversations.

Race and ethnicities aside, prison is a melting pot of sub-cultures. I quickly learned that the culture of self-betterment was the culture I belonged to. When I came to that crossroad. I went right, not left, as I had in society. It is a decision. It's as simple as that.

I could have made the same decision on the outside. Decisions to apply myself academically. Had I done that, I could have earned my paralegal certificate; my Associate of Arts Degree in Business and my Masters Degree in Ministries on the outside, with no victims in my destructive wake.

Nevertheless, by becoming familiar with my own character defects and developing healthy coping skills, I can now recognize character defects in others and respond properly and with empathy. Likewise, by learning and understanding my own potential and value, I can easily recognize the potential and value in others.

Understanding the potential and value in others undergirds my ability to guide crime survivors and fellow prisoners on the path to healing. What I have learned from these interactions is that there are many instances where trauma claws at both victim and perpetrator, and these experiences overlap, creating a community that can be shared and explored.

As I formalized my education toward a BA in Communication Theory, at Cal State LA, I expect that I will learn more and grasp an even deeper understanding of myself and my fellow human beings. For now, I am grateful to have at least grasped my causative factors (of why I jumped into the cesspool) and have developed the pro-social skills necessary to prevent a repeat.

If only I had realized this before; that the culture I belong to is not a sub-culture at all, but the mainstream; a culture of peace, empathy and healing.

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