

Non fiction Article (950 words)

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Title: The Power of Group

When I ask prisoners in my classes about their views they are uncomfortable sharing them. Views are easy to make up, you can just mimic someone if you want. But in a group your views have to be explained in ways that ultimately reveal who you are. An example is publicly answering, "Why did you do your crime?" You can think whatever you want about your motivations, and you can fool yourself. But in a group (that doesn't take B.S. for an answer and repeats the question) you will contend with that lump in your throat. "I did it because I thought I could get away with it and I deserved it," might sound like an answer we could all agree on, but is it the truth?

Probably adding, "... and I didn't have to meet a bunch of new people which I'm not good at ... and... I could have some personal achievement that belonged just to me ... and... isn't society just a bunch of criminals anyway?" Aw, well now we have some views to consider. Most of them are wrong headed but at least they are out in the open.

So what is your answer? This exercise is the beginning of an Rational Self Analysis (RSA). The rest of this exercise is called they-won't-teach-you-this-anywhere-else. Start by considering this question again, "Why did I do my crime?" There are lots of motivations, and parts of different answers align into the decision you made. In a group you get to see those answers emerge: One former college sports pro says all he has to do is change the way he makes money (and goes on to say he has to see his children wear the best clothing, so what is his priority really)... one two-time illegal immigrant grins and sputters some answer in spanglish (he was broke, it was an opportunity, ICE got him, he shakes his head about smuggling again but you see he is insincere)... and one buttoned up Maintenance Crew worker with deep wrinkles and thick glasses just explodes "What do you mean? They lock us up over bull shit." (He likes the thrills of getting away with it, doing drugs and boosting stuff, it's all he talks about.)

As much as the answers differ, so do superior motivations. The next part of this RSA is a question like this, "So how do you plan on not coming back? What will you focus on to keep you on track?" The pseudo answers boil down to (1) family, (2) your job, and (3) some far fetched ambition. These things, most group members assure themselves publicly, will keep them from screwing up again. Whatever your answer is to this, you already had it before you got locked up. How is that going to result in anything different? It's not. You also had the non-partisan skills of organization, follow-thru, and self-motivation (hence the crime you are serving time for). And you had values. Beliefs. All those shiny saviors you are told to work on by Staff or Psychologist and Family. So what is really going to keep you out? Here's a hint: Start a group.

You can organize one anywhere, officially or not. To get started you should infiltrate an existing group and hijack their conversations, like AA or NA. Once you get a feel for their operation then you can solicit some meetings in a library or on the rec yard or in a classroom when no-one minds. Eventually you can slap together some curriculum and get a group approved for regular meetings. But the idea is to start one that addresses meaningful topics with a no B.S. attitude. Here are some examples:

- a. Stress Management
- b. Anger Management
- c. Release Preparation (begins your fist day)
- d. Constructive solutions

Take notes from your group meetings, little things that are said that make sense of the world and your

feelings and good ideas for alternatives for not making decisions like a teenager. Before long you can develop a long list. And in those items you must invest dedicated action. A group also pools its resources and expands the reach of all the members. Lets say you decide to buy one HVAC textbook (Ferris State University) and everyone pays for their own exams (\$20) AND you can pool your resources to hustle candy or nude-photos of Raven to pay for it all. You can do this individually already, but the group acts to hold each member accountable to the higher goal, which is "Don't blow that money, take the exam like we talked about."

Which brings us back to the last question. If you want to stay out you have to change things. It has to involve all areas in your life because they all align and move you deeply. Having a firm grip on self starts with honest conversation about intelligence, will and emotion. You have to identify what you really want out of living. Then you have to identify a civil means of obtaining it, that is the hard part, or rather the part requiring creativity, cooperation and work. Trade certification, Restarting a career, gaining experience in Facilities Maintenance.... these are all good activities for about 40% of your day. What activities can change things elsewhere in your life? Cultivating resources, deliberately practicing new skills, participating in activities far outside your comfort zone, identifying the balance between your passion and a need in the world... these are THE topics to air out in a group. And these are the activities that you will need help with. We all do.

I'll tell you how I motivate myself. The classes and the groups I've started, and helped others start, have grown and motivated others to do better for themselves. It's only a few at a time but that adds up quickly. The problem with observing others is that you can't read their minds or their feelings. So I look at myself. The benefits from this simple work are complex. I have more resources, more permanent possessions because I am trusted to teach a variety of courses by Staff, I have more freedom, basically. I have fewer relationships with drama-makers and more relationships with flawed professionals. Doors open when I write letters that shed light onto my efforts, and those fruits are shared back with each group. The change was simple, I decided to care. And care is what I get in return. Purpose, for me, started with crashing some groups and giving everyone hell about their opinions. Turns out it starts there for a lot of other people too. Check out a group near you and remember your agenda: No B.S.

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