

A PRISONERS MANIFESTO ON REHABILITATION
BY ABRAHAM HAGOS

Rehabilitation. A word commonly used in relation to drug users and prisoners. Many people in society use the word for different reasons and purposes. The core purpose of rehabilitation is to restore a person to a state of good health and a normal life reversing their current condition. How each individual gets to that state is often complex. What works for one individual may not necessarily work for another. Irrespective of how a person gets to the state of rehabilitation it is the will or want to get there that is more critical than any other factor or variable.

For example, say you have two individuals: Mike, who has been sentenced to the Department of Corrections and is an inmate in a state correctional facility. Mike's intake assessment requires him to take TC for his drug use, see the mental health department for his psychological needs, and before he can be paroled he has to get his GED. Mike is not too enthusiastic about being required to take all these programs. Mike quickly learns he will have to do these programs if he wants to be considered to be in compliance and eventually eligible for parole. Therefore, he goes through the motions and completes everything that is required of him.

However, while in prison, Mike is already plotting his future crimes. He has been tightening up his criminal skills by associating with seasoned convicts who have took him under his wings and have schooled him and built bonds and loyalty with them.

The second individual, is Larry. Larry, too, has been sentenced to the Department of Corrections. Larry is devastated about his freedom and liberty taken away from him. Larry's intake assessment didn't require him to take any programs.

While in prison, Larry mostly stayed to himself, except for the occasional recreation intramural sports league he participated in. Larry has a disdain for prison like he's never had for anything else in life. He swore to himself, his family and friends that after his release he would never return to prison.

Both, Mike and Larry eventually are released from prison. True to his word and the prison loyalty he built with the older convicts, Mike began using the criminal education he got from the seasoned convicts to commit new crimes. In the same manner as to how he went through the motions in prison to get through his required programs, Mike attempted to do the same while out on parole. Eventually, Mike's luck runs out. The law catches up with him and he ends up back in prison.

On the other hand, Larry does parole in the same manner he did his time in prison. Larry's disdain for prison and his love for his family, friends, girlfriend, and freedom propels him to excel on parole. Larry successfully completes parole and is discharged with flying colors.

These two examples raise questions on rehabilitation. Why wasn't Mike able to change and be rehabilitated, but Larry was so easily without taking any programs? Remember, Mike successfully completed the TC program and seen mental health professionals on a regular basis. The professionals who ran these programs are highly educated people with bachelor and master degrees. Shouldn't those programs and regular mental health visits rehabilitated Mike? Shouldn't Larry reoffended since he didn't take any rehabilitative programs? Clearly, the recidivism rate wasn't in his favor, especially since he didn't have the intense counseling that Mike did.

The question is simple: Is rehabilitation a choice or something that can be taught? If Mike's intentions weren't to become a better criminal and if he would have picked a better crowd to associate himself with in prison would he have had been rehabilitated? Does other factors play a role in a person's rehabilitation? Does factors, such as education, age, background, prior incarceration, income have an impact on one's success? Or would none of these factors mattered if Mike would have had the same mindset that Larry had?

Here is my take on rehabilitation. The theory of what works for one person may not work for another person is moot if a person does not have the intentions of truly wanting to be rehabilitated. No

amount of counseling, therapy, etc. will matter if the desire and will isn't there in a person. The things that can make a person decide to rehabilitate will vary. Some may tire of getting high and the lifestyle that comes with it, some may feel guilt from hurting their family, some might have found religion or a higher calling.

I've been incarcerated since November of 1998, over sixteen years and counting. Throughout the years, I've personally experienced a lot and have witnessed other's rehabilitation attempts and lack thereof. My observations have led me to conclude that rehabilitation comes from within. Throughout my years of incarceration, I've seen numerous inmates treat prison like a revolving door.

The one's that I've got to know on a personal level share some similar characteristics with sentences usually in the 4-16 years range. It could be a possibility that because of how much time they have plays a role in how they view their incarceration and rehabilitation.

I believe some of the factors stated earlier play an important role in a person's rehabilitation. That's not to say one factor will necessarily trump a person's rehabilitation. One factor can have a significant impact on a person's rehabilitation.

A lot of inmates end up in a repetitive cycle that's self-destructive. We let our past background, education, so-called "friends", peer pressure, society weigh us down and prevent us from rehabilitating. That's why I believe rehabilitation has to be more than just about oneself. Obviously, when one is rehabilitated, it will have a positive ripple effect on the individual, his family, friends, society and his community and so forth.

When not, it will have the opposite effect and the cycle continues and gets passed on to the next generation. I have personally witnessed this, as some of my family members and friends from my next generation have entered the criminal justice system.

I believe that inmates that keep returning to prison for short durations are less likely to rehabilitate than an inmate that has been in prison for one long continuous sentence. From my personal experience and observations an inmate that has done one long continuous sentence is much more well-rounded than a person who keeps returning to prison.

For me and many others, factors like being away from our family, friends, kid(s) and freedom were a few of the reasons that were the cause for me to change my life. Along with this was coming to the realization that I was responsible for me being in prison. Taking responsibility for the choices and decisions I made and to quit trying to rationalize everything to justify my actions.

Even though the way I grew up and where I did installed a mind set in me that the things that I were doing were right I have been able to realize that I was living a manufactured life that wasn't sustainable for long. This realization did not come over night. I have had my ups and downs, but eventually I was able to realize how my past mentality was one of immaturity, fantasy and self-destructiveness. If I can get a "short timer" to think and feel like a prisoner that has done a long sentence and to quit thinking that coming to prison is a badge of honor would be a great first step.

I believe a key component in rehabilitation is maturity. Maturity does not come automatically with age. It comes from experience, time, counseling, self-awareness, just to name a few of the things that establish maturity. Like myself, most prisoners that are doing 30, 40, and life sentences have been incarcerated from a young age. More than not, a majority of prisoners, due to their maturity, that have been incarcerated for a long continuous sentence would not make the same decisions now that they did when they committed their offenses. Therefore, due to circumstances and chance, their odds of having been rehabilitated would be much higher than an inmate who keeps returning to prison for short durations of time.

Of course, this is not to say a person that has a short sentence cannot be successfully rehabilitated. Earlier, I gave a scenario of two prisoners, Larry and Mike. Larry was successfully rehabilitated mostly on his own initiative, using will power and his desire to not return to prison, which was opposite of Mike. My opinion is based on my observation of over 16 years of incarceration and meeting hundreds of inmates from numerous prisons and getting to know a lot of prisoners on a personal level.

You will always have some inmates that do not want to be rehabilitated. I've come across numerous prisoners who were straight forward and admitted that they will get "back in the game" after their release. Needless to say these inmates will continue to return to prison until they reach maturity, if they don't die in the streets. The good news is that these inmates are in the minority.

At one time rehabilitation was a top priority for prisons. As the crime rate increased the focus turned to punishment, which allocated the money and resources to incarceration. Throughout the country and especially Colorado legislation was passed increasing presumptive ranges for felonies and allocating more money for the DOC to build more prison and allowed the for profit private prisons build prisons in Colorado.

For example, in the 1970's a class 1 felony was 10 year-to-life. In the early 1980's it turned to 20 years-to-life. In 1985 it turned to 40 years-to-life. Then, finally, in 1991 it became life with no parole. As the 1990's produced the get tuff on crime legislation throughout the country the federal government got in on the wave and passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act in 1994 which removed financial educational aid for incarcerated inmates. I believe this was a disservice to a prisoner and society.

The presumptive ranges for all other felonies increased also. Juveniles weren't exempt from the changes in the legislation neither. Juveniles as young as 14 were being charged as adults and given life

sentences with no parole. If they were charged as a juvenile the longest they could have been incarcerated for would have been until they were 21.

Within the last few years the United States Supreme Court has ruled it is unconstitutional to sentence a juvenile to life with no parole, which they ruled amounted to cruel and unusual punishment. Legislators in Colorado and throughout the country are or already have created new sentencing reforms to comply with this ruling.

Even though I was 23 years old when I caught my case and not legally a juvenile I was immature and misdirected in many ways. Throughout my years of incarceration I've met tens of juveniles and young people sentenced to life with no parole. A majority of the one's I've met are smart, talented, mature and remorseful. Like myself, I know they could be released and be productive law abiding members of society.

It's become apparent to people in society from varying backgrounds from ultra-conservatives like the Koch brothers to liberals like Barry Sanders that Americas criminal justice system needs overhauling. They've come to understand that there are too many people in prison and plenty with excessive sentences. Far too many prisoners are growing old in prison with deteriorating health, which in turns adds cost to the almost one billion dollar Colorado Department of Corrections budget that tax payers pay.

In the last few years Colorado has taken steps to reduce the recidivism rates in various ways. For example, some drug offenses presumptive range have been lowered. Technical infractions while on parole have been altered. Organizations like Colorado Cure and the Colorado Justice Reform Coalition are leading the way for progressive changes for Colorado prisoners.

Just recently, in Otisville, New York there's a pilot program that has started called Prison-to-College. It's a program that allows inmates that are within 5 years to their release date to attend college courses in prison taught by a college professors that's from local New York colleges. After their release the prisoners can continue their education that their already familiar professors teach at.

It is important to understand that rehabilitation is an ongoing process. It's like a stream that flows on and on through different sceneries and environments, in a way that a person would face life's various challenges. A person's thought process, which produces his behavior is the rehabilitation that is manifesting itself into their everyday reality. In a sense, rehabilitation is the stream that continues on a daily basis.

In conclusion, one has to not perceive rehabilitation as a burden or in a negative light, but rather look forward to it as a welcomed guest. Once that is mentally installed in a person's mind, than rehabilitation can start. From there, one will develop the core belief that rehabilitation is a good thing and in their best interest.

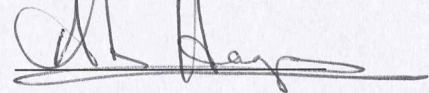
Certain programs may or may not work for a group of people. But, the key element(s) lies within each person. Every person has something within them that would make them overcome the cycle of the generational revolving door into prison and the criminal justice system. Some might figure it out after one stint in prison, like Larry did, or some might after numerous stints or some may never figure it out.

On a personal level, for me, after almost 17 years in prison, I have a clearer perspective on life, family, friends, society and most importantly myself. When you can honestly admit to yourself the wrong you have done, whether it was to a friend, family, the community, wife, children, a stranger, whoever it was too that's when rehabilitation really begins. I've taken numerous classes and have been administratively segregated twice. If I had not made the decision to change, then nothing else would have mattered in me changing my thought process and behavior.

The key elements for me that caused me to change my thought process was my family and my true friends. By realizing how my incarceration has affected them so negatively has provided me the core reason for me yearning for change. The reason(s) for causing a person to change and rehabilitate will differ from person to person.

One thing for certain is that every individual human being has the potential and ability to be rehabilitated. The key is to unlock the psychological, physical, emotional restraints that we place upon ourselves. Once we achieve that we will truly begin the rehabilitation process and only then can we stop the cycle so the next generation will not have to go through what we did in order to understand life is much, much more than what we've been accustomed to.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Abraham Hagos', written over a horizontal line.