

SCARRED  
The Effect of Institutionalization

By

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- NONFICTION -



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I once read somewhere the mind provoking statement, "Weak is he who permits his thoughts to control his actions; Strong is he who forces his actions to control his thoughts." I'm not sure of the origin of the phrase - although, it had the flavor of being from a different era - perhaps it was written by some great philosopher, sage or nobleman hundreds of years ago. But it wasn't the origin that intrigued me as much as the substance of the phrase itself. For the most part, I grasped, "Weak is he who permits his thoughts to control his actions", it was the second part of the statement, "Strong is he who forces his actions to control his thoughts", that I couldn't quite wrap my mind around. I mean, how do you "force" your actions to control your thoughts - is that humanly possible? Especially for someone in my shoes, who has spent the majority of his life in a battle to retain possession of his mind while behind bars.

For the majority of the world, the word "institutionalized" is just another word in the dictionary. Just another word of the English language bearing little, if any significance upon the lives of people who'll never utter the word, use it in any daily conversation, nor ever fall victim to its meaning. But for those of us behind bars, the possibility of it becoming a reality always looms.



A word synonymous with being programmed - it's when someone else has acquired the capacity to think for you. It's said that you're institutionalized when every waking moment of your life evolves around prison. When you've conformed, and become like one of many heads in a herd of cattle, helplessly allowing your herders to steer you along. It's what "Red" - Morgan Freeman's character in the movie, Shawshank Redemption - meant when he said that he had become an "institution man". In essence, what he was saying was that prison had become entwined in the fabric of his being. That it had overtaken him to the point where he felt as though prison was the only suitable place for him.

Institutionalized is when you're no longer capable of grasping the concept of being free. Although you're cognizant of another world existing beyond the perimeter of the prison fence, you no longer have the ability to envision yourself living in it. The focal point of your world now consists of trivial concerns as what concoction is being served in the prison chow hall, the accumulation of commissary, or what program is airing tonight, and whether yard will be called on time, or some other insignificant mundane activity associated with the monotony of doing time.

Let the record reflect that during the course of my 27 years of incarceration, I've yet to meet anyone who actually takes pride in being labeled institutionalized. In fact, very few admit to succumbing to such a fate - refusing to be associated with the stigma attached to it. Somewhere in the past it being established that referring to someone as institutionalized was offensive, something to take issue with, or to be offended by. Like a homosexual does in being referred to as a "fag", an Arab a "camel jockey", or an African-American a "nigger". But the reality of the matter - whether



we choose to accept it or not - is that the rigors of prison affects all who have been subject to it to some degree. It just takes its toll on some more than others.

It may be overtly displayed, or inconspicuously disguised in those of us who've somehow managed to do a fairly decent job of tucking it away. But nonetheless it's there, lurking beneath the surface. The thing about it is, institutionalization creeps up on you. Sort of like a bad case of acne - you wake up one morning and it's just there. Each pimple inclusive of its own murky substance - unchecked ego, image issues, addiction, mental illness, etc.

To say that prison is an environment where the whole spectrum of emotions are seldom exhibited, is an understatement. The effect of which often results in the suppression of our most innate feelings and an inability to effectively express our emotion, attributed to a sense of shame, embarrassment or fear of how others may perceive us. I've found that it's more easier - or should I say, more convenient - to just hide behind a facade than to come face to face with your demons. That is, until one of those bumps from a case of that "acne" comes to a head one day, bursting from the residual effects of neglect and plays out in abnormal, antisocial behavior. Subsequently, leaving you scarred from years of pent up, unexpressed emotion that has improperly healed.

While you were busy building a wall around you - a facade - and adapting to your surroundings, you were oblivious to the transformation that's taken place within you. Unmindful of the anxiety that builds up in you everyday at precisely the same time, as you anticipate a C.O.'s (correctional officer's) call for "chow-time!". Unaware of the fact that your once causal stride has now evolved into a hurried strut, as you make a mad dash for a "good spot" in line for your daily ration of whatever slop happens to be on the menu that



particular day. Ignorant of your role in the feeding frenzy, and how like an animal, you've become trained to "wolf down" meals in no time flat in order to make room to accommodate the next herd of prisoners waiting to be grazed. The cycle repeating itself breakfast, lunch and dinner, day-in and day-out. The institutionalization has begun.

If you'd ask me, contrary to what some would like to believe, no one whose ever served any substantial amount of time escapes the grip of incarceration unscratched. For those fortunate enough to successfully maneuver through the system, eventually freeing themselves of the brick, mortar and barbed wire prison, they often find that they're nonetheless still a captive of a mental prison and suffer from occasional side-effects of having done time. Some notice that they've contracted a mild case of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), an incessant need to surround themselves with order and neatness. No doubt, behavior forged in them from years of being ordered to maintain a tidy cell or suffer the consequences. For others it's exemplified in the difficulty to make even the minutest of decisions. An indecisiveness that can only be attributed to atrophy of that portion of the brain. And it becomes apparent at night, when the lights are out and their significant other attempts some simple gesture of affection - a kiss, a caress or cuddle. A sentiment of affection, but nevertheless an unexpected act that instantly sends them momentarily reeling into "defense mode". The side-effect from spending years deplete of the human touch. Trust me, it finds a way to take its toll on you in some shape, form or fashion.

The stark reality is that no one escapes. And I'm not foolish enough to believe that I'm some inexplicable exception to some rule. The only thing that separates me from a lot of other prisoners is the fact that I'm not in denial...I 'KNOW' that I'm fucked up. I'm aware that after 27 years behind



denial...I 'KNOW' that I'm fucked up. I'm aware that after 27 years behind bars, I have a case of my own acne containing issues that need treating - but for me, knowing that is half the battle. I sincerely believe that one of the most crucial aspects of not succumbing to a fate of institutionalization is to every now and then commit to deep introspect. By that I mean, allowing yourself an opportunity to take inventory of yourself. To take the time to scrutinize and be honest concerning how you feel about the person you see in the mirror.

Are you happy with the reflection staring back at you, disappointed, or merely content? And in spite of the circumstances surrounding your situation, are you living up to what remains of your potential, or like a defeated boxer have you thrown in the towel? Are you striving to put your soul in a better place - meaning is your moral compass centered, or is it in need of readjusting? Have you put forth any effort to become a better person - a better father, son, brother, uncle or friend? Do you embrace each day, grateful for the opportunity to make amends for some of your past indiscretions?

It's a process that's helped me to put things in their proper perspective and keep in tune to what really matters. It may sound cliché, but I've learned that it's true - it is the simple things in life, the things that money can't buy - sound health, loving family, good friends and of course, freedom - that are the most important. The things that we effortlessly take for granted when blessed with, but so desperately yearn for when out of our grasp.

I guess that you could say that the process is one that keeps me focused and in touch with the truth. Particularly, at the times when the world tries to convince me that the totality of my worth is defined by a prison number,



the truth helps me to see that that's just not the case. On those days when doubt tries to persuade me down the path of despair, it reminds me that there's hope. And when I find myself questioning, "why me?", it allows me to keep it real with myself, and in turn reply "why not me?". After all, when it's all said and done, you can lie to everyone but yourself. It took me a while, but I finally realized that it's not so much the parole board, as it is the truth, that sets you free. If not physically, then mentally.

You see, the truth is the substance that I use daily to clean the lens to my soul with. When my conscience is murky, it allows me to discern the insignificance of the things that we as prisoners place such abundant value in. It abruptly confronts me at those times when I'm veering off course, and in need of my mental GPS to remind me that a bar of soap is just that - something meant to bathe with. That an Oddle Noodle, no matter how well dressed up, is still a cheap processed food item, no more, no less. And regardless to the emphasis that's placed on any of the "pacifiers" that we're afforded - because that's all that they really are - and convert into the currency of our petty world, the reality is, it's all worthless. A tell-tale sign of institutionalization is when someone has lost sight of that.

More importantly, the truth gives me the capacity to empathize with my fellow prisoner who has, unfortunately, surrendered to a fate of institutionalization. It gives me the strength to overlook his flawed perception, and enables me to be patient with him, in spite of the fact that he's lost the capacity to be patient with others. To understand that the lens to his conscience is momentarily clouded by a layer of film that has distorted his sense of judgment. To understand that that same bar of soap that I'm still able to see for what it's really worth, means so much more to him.



It's sad to say, but many assaults - and quite a few deaths - have occurred in prison over something as trivial as a debt of a few honey buns, or a couple bags of coffee. Shit has a way of getting "real" really quick when your dealing with someone whose lost sight of the truth. They'll often justify their actions by convincing themselves, as well those around them, that it's not so much about the item, as it is the "principle" of the matter. Basing their argument on some absurd prison ideology, that grants them permission to physically extract retribution on another prisoner. The violation of a so-called, "prison code of ethics", making it impossible for them to lower the wing of compassion toward another human being. I've witnessed it time and time again, and accept it as just being the reality of the world that I now reside in.

The ironic thing about it is, how we are able to so easily find "principle" in doing harm to another prisoner - someone who is in the same boat - over something as insignificant as a Ramen Noodle. Something saturated in additives so foreign to us - mononitrate, riboflavin, diglycerides, polysorbate, hexametaphosphate - that there leaves little room for doubt of it being deficient of nutrients and a detriment to our health. But yet by the same token, hesitate in voicing our grievances to the powers that be, over a lack of clean, filtered drinking water, as well as a balanced diet high in fresh fruits and vegetables - two things that we know are essential to good health. Again, it goes back to twisted prison ideology.

For me, someone whose been in prison since the age of nineteen, the most troubling aspect of this thesis is the fact that one of our most valuable resources - that is, our youth - are being subject to this debauchery of the mind it seems much too soon. Over the years I've crossed paths with many baby-faced "menaces" - the title that the courts label you when they plan



on taking you off of the streets for a long time. Once I got to know many of them, I realized that a lot of those so-called menaces turn out to be misguided youth that just made some bad decisions. Although not exclusive to any race, I've also noticed that most of them share at least one of three common factors - being from the inner city, underprivileged, and minority. It makes me wonder, how big of a menace can these children be that the only solution is to stamp them with a prison number and ship them off to an adult prison? An article that I once read referred to it as the, "kindergarten to prison pipeline". The hope of the youth, and their ability to dream and imagine the possibilities, pilfered from the rich soil of the garden of their young minds like seedlings prematurely uprooted before bringing forth their intended fruit. Leaving in its wake anger, bitterness and misdirected indignation.

They're already mad at mothers that bring them into this world without the necessary means to adequately provide for them - materially, as well as emotionally. Bringing them into a world that they are not living in, but merely existing in. Angry with mothers that fell prey to addiction, and left them and their siblings to fend for themselves. Enraged over the fact that their mother chose the lust of a man over the love of their child, time and time again. And mostly, for having to confront the cold realities of this world far before their time.

They harbor hatred for men that they've never considered as fathers. But see them more as males whose only role in their lives was that of a sperm donor. Someone who sowed their seed in their mother's fertile soil, then failed to stick around to care for, nourish and nurture it into full bloom. Despising them for that, and the indelible stain that they've left upon their mother's heart.



They're furious with a society that locks up their fathers and mothers at an alarming rate without so much as regard to the lasting affect that their absence will have on their lives. Irate with a society that places them in failing educational systems, leaving them ill-equipped to compete in an ever-evolving world. A broken system that, in the words of president Barack Obama, fails to "inspire to aspire". They hold contempt for a system which by all indications abhors them, and has discarded them like used tampons into the toilets of society - fostercare, juvenile detention centers, jails and prisons. When faced with such insurmountable odds, it makes it that much more astonishing to me that there are those youth that, nonetheless, somehow manage to find a way to thrive in spite of the dispiriting circumstances surrounding their situation. And in all fairness, is an accomplishment that should be applauded by society to the same extent as when they are condemned for their failures.

My experience with the younger generation that I've come in contact with in prison has taught me something extremely vital. That being, that once the light of hope has been smothered, its difficult to revive it. Not that it can't be done, but just like a camper trying desperately to build a fire by rubbing two sticks together on a humid evening, it takes a lot of time and effort. A lot of effort to get them to believe in themselves, and to realize that there's a better way than a life of crime. To get them to believe that they're not worthless, and that their lives matter. To get them to see that if they just applied themselves to some legit endeavor, using determination and fortitude as a guide, that they have the potential to aspire to great heights. But getting them to realize that, is something that is often easier said than done.



Hindsight, the perception of an event after it has occurred, is a cruel thing. Cruel in the aspect that it only allows us to see the error of our ways after we've made mistakes. After we've committed to circumstance, and it's too late to alter fate. Often leaving us immersed in regret, and lamenting over what we could've - should've - done differently. In my case, forever regretting the day, or at least that split-second, that my finger pulled the trigger of a gun that took another person's life. Regret over not being able to see how much pain that split-second would cause the community, the victim's family as well as mine. Not to mention the regret of having squandered over 26 years of my life behind bars, and leaving me questioning how life might've turned out had that split-second played out differently.

But as the saying goes, hindsight is 20/20, and the reality is that no matter how hard I wish to, I can never change the past. That moment in time is forever lost, etched in the annals of time. The only thing left for me to do is look toward the future. To try to seek redemption by sharing my story, in hopes of deterring some other angry, lost, young soul from living a life overwhelmed with regret. To try to convince them that life has so much more to offer than a life of institutionalization - the hard part is getting them to want more for themselves.

Something that I was reminded one beautiful summer morning while I was working out on the prison yard. I'd just finished running my usual thirty minutes, and was in the process of coercing my sweat drenched, forty-five year old frame into doing a few sets of chin-ups and dips before calling it a day. Listening to Jay-Z through one of the ears of the headphones that I wore cocked on my head, I took in the crisp morning air in between sets



and let my mind drift outside of the prison fence, as I routinely did. Halfway through a thought of life on the other side, when I was prematurely brought back to the prison yard by three young acquaintances whose company I now found myself in the midst of. None of them appearing to be over the age of twenty-five, the three had been out and about, kicking it while walking laps around the yard, before deciding to stop and taunt me for a minute.

"What Up, Old School?", asked a shortie who looked to be a teenager, and probably the youngest of the three.

"What's good, Unk?", inquired the slim, lanky, light-skinned accomplice sporting a blue skull cap that accompanied him. Possibly in his twenties, he locked in the same housing unit with me.

"I see ya old ass out here tryin' to look young?", the last one of the crew sarcastically added, amusing the other two, and all three started to chuckle. But of course, he was right.

I cracked a smile, did another set of dips, and then proceeded to inform my young audience of the benefits of staying healthy - making sure to place emphasis on the lack of adequate health care that prisoners receive - before firing back, "...you better hope that your ass look this good when you get my age!".

While the other two were still laughing, the one that addressed me as "Old School" - the youngest of the three - made eye contact with me, and with a stoic, half smirk - half grin etched across his face, replied "Shit, I'll be dead by then...at least I hope I'm dead."

Although the statement was made during the heat of a joking conversation, there was something in the way that he said it - in the tone of his voice and his demeanor - that led me to believe that shortie meant every word of it.



## B I O G R A P H Y

Brian K. McCarn, is a Detroit native who has spent the last 26 years of his life behind bars. Growing up in a lower-middle class, two parent household on the city's westside, he vividly recalls his parents devotion in providing for him and his two siblings, materially as well as morally. A product of the Detroit Public School system, he attended Henry Ford high school up until the 11th grade, before dropping out and earning his GED from Ferndale high school.

In 1987, during the height of Detroit's crack cocaine epidemic, Brian was introduced to the drug game by a childhood friend who had become a leading figure in the illicit sell of the narcotic. And at age 18, he would be exposed to what he then thought was the "good life". Although never exceeding the status of small time crack dealer, nonetheless, access to fast money fueled his thirst for materialism. In 1988, approximately a little over a year after being indoctrinated into a world of fast cash, women and cars, Brian would find himself on trial for 2nd degree murder in connection with a drug related shooting. He would subsequently be found guilty, and sentenced to a parolable life sentence.

During the course of his incarceration Brian made a conscience decision to dedicate to introspection and self-betterment, and has continuously sought growth through whatever limited means of education at his disposal. He was on his way to earning a college degree before funding for Pell grants were eliminated from the prison system. Not to be discouraged, he earned a diploma in Small Business Management, and continues to be an active voice in various organizations that promote growth through self-development, e.g., the NAACP, Chance For Life, and the National Lifers of America, Inc. Brian considers himself fortunate to have had the opportunity to participate in these organization, which have allowed him a platform to mentor young men entering the Michigan Dept. of Corrections.

In 2007, through a program sponsored by the Chance For Life organization, at one of the prisons he was housed at, Brian received valuable training as a counselor in the field of alcoholism and other drugs. And considers his passing of the Michigan Certified Board of Addictions Professionals exam, to be one of his greatest accomplishments while behind bars. The passing of the exam afforded Brian an opportunity to somehow give back for some of his past indiscretions through the facilitation of substance abuse counseling sessions. Most importantly, it helped him to realize the deterioration that drugs and violence reap upon society, especially that of the African-American community.

Today, he is immensely remorseful, ashamed and regretful for the role that he played in that devastation and now uses his pen as a vehicle to express that. His submission, "It Just Ain't Worth It", was originally submitted to the FreeForm Radio Initiative's INCARCERATED VOICES project in 2013. The piece earning him a Certificate of Excellence, and affirmed his strong belief of there being no amount of gain that is worth the cost in pain paid with the lives of others. It was through Brian's involvement with INCARCERATED VOICES that he discovered his passion for writing and is currently working on a memoir. Brian is scheduled for review for parole in October of 2015.



Brian can be reached for comments or inquiries in reference to his writing via Jpay.com, or you can write him directly at:

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Brian would like to thank you for taking the time to share his world.