

The stress within prison walls is really not all that different from the 'real' world of stress. So we prisoners do many of the same things that 'ordinary' people do to cope with the stress we all face. One way to cope is through diversion, as through mental and physical exercise. I'm not much of a sportsman anymore (though I dearly miss the swimming pool), but I like to get out of my routine and comfort zone a little by playing around in the yard sometimes. I also enjoy tackling difficult challenges and assignments for work and school.

Various activities like tutoring and teaching, religious services, and creative activities of various sorts are also good ways to stay focused and semi-fulfilled. It's fulfilling to be productive and creative. It's a challenge to get started sometimes, but time flies by when I get moving and stay engaged, especially when working with or for others, or when working independently on some goal of mine.

For example, I spend a lot of time working in the Education department, where I serve as a computer programmer, network and systems administrator, and tutor. I also enjoy studying the Russian language, so I read aloud daily, and facilitate a Russian course once per week. And I enjoy writing, so I have three ongoing writing projects, and I try to keep up on letter writing.

I also have goals related to improving my interpersonal skills, such as being sincerely interested in others, listening actively, communicating assertively, managing effectively, identifying and following the leader, taking direction from the leader, and directing others as needed, tactfully, which seems to start with knowing and managing myself. So I've recently completed a 'Personal Relations' cell-study course through the PrisonEd foundation, and will pursue similar courses and good books on the subject in the future. I have also served for over two years (and will continue to serve) as a facilitator of weekly 'core' courses in the STRIVE program to keep these topics fresh in my mind.

I played volleyball a few times this past summer, for a change. My performance wasn't spectacular, but I have a pretty good serve when I'm warmed up, and played all right overall. For me it wasn't about winning or losing; it was just for fun. And it was a good stress reliever of course. The 'sand' in the volleyball court is more like grains of asphalt, so I sustained a little road rash, and I torqued my lower back when I landed hard once. I still remember that hard landing: it was Independence Day, July 4th, and I was in pain for a week or more. But it was still fun and I'll continue playing on occasion.



One friend (and coworker) asked me to join him in the weight room, which is a privilege for our housing unit. Only those members of our community who've reached the top honor level are allowed access. He claims that lifting weights helps him feel normal, like a "regular human being." Maybe it'd be good for me, but when can I spare the time? (You might imagine prisoners sitting around with plenty of time to spare, but my schedule is packed quite tightly with work, classes, and such. My bunk-mate John, on the other hand, goes home in a month and has been an avid fitness lately, often spending two or three hours per day working out. The results are impressive! He looks like Mr. Universe.)

Anyway, if anything I should force myself to take a break from work more often, and stay a little more physically active. I'll probably never be a body builder or a muscle-bound weightlifter, as many guys around here are, but I like to at least get the blood pumping with some pushups every day, and stay active in general. I also practice Tai Chi twice or three times a week, which helps strengthen my legs and core especially. And of course, I have to walk a couple miles total each day, back and forth between housing and my workplace. But even then, it's not nearly as much exercise as I used to get, and my upper body has atrophied somewhat. So I could use some more physical exercise, and it's a renewed goal of mine to get into a little better shape this year, to practice healthy eating habits, and yoga and meditation.

My work is a good challenge for me. I'm very grateful to work in the Education department, and I feel challenged to learn, grow, and teach. It's a constructive outlet for me to build programs and to work with others. Sometimes a stressful place, especially when various personalities butt heads or tempers flare in confined quarters. There are over a hundred inmate tutors and volunteers in various capacities serving throughout the institution here. Obviously, as in any working environment, we don't always agree with one another, and sometimes it's necessary to buckle down and stand one's ground and/or define boundaries, without allowing the thoughts and opinions of others to offend.

It's helpful to just meditate and pray for peace sometimes, internally, before attempting to address interpersonal issues. Oftentimes such a prayer resolves the whole issue by making it suddenly clear, through inspiration of the Spirit, that the perceived issue was really nothing, and there's no need to be irate or territorial. Lately, at the time of this writing, my Guardian Angel has been advising me to 'abstain' and to stay true to myself by avoiding unnecessary confrontation, to avoid being the ram that gets his horns caught in the fence after butting against it impatiently. In other words, be patient!



Usually a single night's rest is enough to bring back a fully sane state. Being humble and receptive enough to accept the promptings of the Spirit is vital. Not only at night, when I can unplug and energize and enjoy astral travel, but also throughout the business day as well. The question I have to ask myself on occasion is, "am I making time to retune into the Spirit; to watch and to listen?"

Doing it alone is impossible, so relationships are important. Communing with others to ponder and discuss various subjects – spiritual and philosophical and temporal – seems to be vital to our emotional and mental health. Sometimes we don't have perfect solutions, at least not in the short term, so the best therapy of all is to realize and accept the difficulty of the situation, and to realize that others have challenging situations and trials as well.

Confiding in friends and family is important, of course, but it's equally important to avoid the 'confidence trap' in which a relationship forms upon a weak foundation of complaining, criticizing, and/or condemning. It's as true here as it is anywhere that a 'best friendship' can quickly turn into a sour, negative sinkhole if both parties don't make an effort to stay positive and uplifting, complimentary and praiseworthy. Relationships are no better than the habits and activities formed around them.

It's nice to be light-hearted and joke around a bit, to keep things from becoming too heavy and serious, but equally important to respect comfort zones and sanctity. Maintaining personal integrity is at the core of it all: taking care to remember one's values and to avoid sacrificing ideals or morals just for a quick, easy, comfortable compromise. It's tempting to take whatever sort of attention we can get – whatever resembles love and friendship – when we're locked up for a long time, and we start to dwell on what's missing from our lives. (Been there, done that....)

So we have to be discerning and careful with our feelings. Most likely it was a mistaken understanding of our feelings that led most criminals to offend others in the first place. My guess is that very few offenders, if any, really intended to act out offensively. We just got caught up in the heat of some circumstances, and didn't have a clear grip on reality – on true feelings and repercussions.

We became detached due to some mental disease and/or addiction, and so we were numb and unaware of certain realities. Most of us have good hearts; passionate and loving hearts. We've experienced pain, and then we sought to fulfill our identities – to find real purpose and function and form. And we made a bad choice, or a series of bad choices, after inviting destructive or insane influences into our lives.



I don't believe all criminals can be resuscitated/reformed/corrected, but I do believe that the vast majority of us can be. Not that this is an easy, painless transition. Rather, I think it usually requires significant pressure to change and awaken, to reconnect and re-associate. It requires making a switch from being quite selfish to one who desires to serve others unselfishly. Which means developing a sense of gratitude for all that one has, in recognition of one's gifts and blessings, and then making the effort to give and to help others, including strangers and past criminals, and other human beings who might be struggling or need help. (Aren't we all in this boat?)

Of course, making this transition means swallowing personal pride a bit; not sacrificing one's standards nor diminishing one's pride in God, but rather starting to care about the wants and needs of others, just as much if not more than we care about our own selfish and private wants and wishes.

To me, this means more than just serving other human beings in the flesh; it also extends to being environmentally conscientious and more sensitive to the Spirit.

Today, I've been a bit under the weather and feeling 'gunky' – just less than optimal. I've felt somewhat manic and self-centered at work, despite my good intentions to be selfless and service-minded. I've also had some success and made significant progress on several tasks and projects lately. But my sinuses are restricted and my breathing has been slightly irregular, due to some sort of allergies – a pretty typical, ongoing problem that I deal with.

Drinking more water and herbal tea seems to help. And after paying attention and making the effort to stay in communication with my eyes and ears and sinuses, and with my focus, I've realized I ought to be still more often. When I'm still, the polar binaries of the mental and physical gyroscope can find a comfortable balance, so to speak, so that I can be clear and reach further with my senses. There's a certain type of 'indifference' that allows the anxiety to settle, so that I'm not all wound up and worried about my internal senses, and so that my insides are in communication with the outside, so to speak.

In the evening time, after lights go out, I find myself eager to rest. This is also when I usually do some writing or sketching on my bunk. I make an effort to write at least six days a week, not only on this personal autobiographical work, but also on a book project that I've been working on for years now. I like the state of mind which writing invokes. Reading, studying, and writing help me remember who I am, and calm my nerves. They bring me back to a more sensitive and subtle state when I can more clearly and consciously discern the spirits, if you will, ironically as I prepare to enter the 'unconscious' part of my day. It does me well to meditate and get in touch with my subconscious throughout the day.



Getting in touch with my subconscious doesn't mean turning off or giving up; it just means finding balance. It means getting back in communication with every part of my body; back to a calm, still sense of balance and enlightenment and energized clarity, in which I can really SEE and LISTEN and OBSERVE. It's an ongoing goal; a moving target which can seem unattainable at times.

The interesting thing, which is an old cliché and a theme I've already addressed, is that the greatest success seems to come when I can get outside of myself, stop worrying about my OWN balance per se, and start praying for God to help all of us. May God please help balance ALL our souls! We need to pray for each other. Maybe my calm and still balance can help another, when I locate it myself.

The interesting thing about love is that it is never totally lost. In fact it proves to survive and motivate no matter what else the circumstances. It's so critical and central to one's survival – within prison walls or without – to allow that love to lead the way, without allowing shadows of doubt or fear, or stress or pain, to distract from the reality, which is spiritual perfection and communion with others. How can we keep the positive, loving attitude of gratitude central in our minds and lives?

I know of no other way than to constantly surround oneself with reminders of the same. We already know all this stuff, so it's not like we need to be taught, but we need to (or ought to, for our own benefit) remind others and ourselves. This is possible by means of communing, to discuss and to consider good, uplifting subjects: not only the eternal-perspective spiritual sort of subjects, but also the down-to-earth practical stuff. Any sort of study and learning is good, of course – and we do plenty of that on the job and during personal study time – but I'm referring in particular to the study of 'core' subjects, central to our emotional and psychological well-being; those subjects that invite *balance*.

Here in the Gale community, where I live, we try to reinforce those subjects through a series of core classes. I enjoy facilitating one of these classes once per week, and sometimes I walk out of a class feeling enlightened. For example, it was in one of these classes recently that I considered, for the first time, that 'compromising' is an extension of adversarial, competitive thinking.

It's a small thing, perhaps seemingly inconsequential to the reader, but it was sort of an 'ah-hah' moment for me to make this connection; a good reminder. Some of the conflicts we engage are only stressful or painful because we delude ourselves into believing there is a zero-sum game or competition, when there really isn't. Or we assume that the battle is ours to fight, when in fact the battle is, and always was in the hands of Higher Power.



So rather than searching for some sort of victory, we need only to realize (remember) that the perceived conflict is quite often an illusion, and there really is no conflict. It seems so simple, and I think we've always known this stuff intuitively, but somehow – speaking for myself – I get lost in the chain of reactions sometimes, and allow myself to become polarized too easily. I need to remember to get my mind above the contest, so to speak, to see clearly and to regain balance and peace. This implies a sort of indifference, but it is neither idleness nor ignorance. Rather, it is an effective, inspired, harmonious plane of thought and movement and action. It is cautious optimism, focusing less on competition and more on cooperation, less on divisiveness and more on unifying.

This indifference means feeling okay about loving others and oneself, and God, rather than repressing that love due to false, invalid reasoning. It means making contact and identifying with that which is inside, and letting *that which is inside feel that which is outside*. It's a wonderful realization that leads toward greater harmony within, along with an increased capacity to commune with others.

This goal of "restored balance and peace" can also be somewhat vague and grandiose in scope, but manageable and real if we take one step at a time. The first step of the day is always the one that meets with the most resistance, due to the simple law of inertia. But thanks to the same law, every subsequent step after the first becomes easier, as we take advantage of the momentum gained. God and the angels really are preparing the way before us (and it's very clear that those people who realize this fact are hugely advantaged in life, over those who fail and/or refuse to realize).

So whom am I trying to convince?

Admittedly part of the challenge here is to remain convinced, each and every day, of one's purpose and direction. To stagnate or otherwise forget is potentially crushing upon the mind and soul, because one thing is certain: the world keeps turning and the competition for life and survival carries on. Opposition and conflict are inevitable. And sometimes both are imaginary, so there's a balancing act to maintain sanity and awareness and fulfillment. So, some of what I write here is to convince – more like 'remind' – myself, and hopefully to indirectly convince you and others as well about the journey, the boundaries, and the need for intuitive tenacity along the way.

Many things – most things – are out of my immediate control, so I'm the charioteer without reins, so to speak. But by choosing to put my faith in the forces which draw the chariot, my hands are free to act, and I am free to look around me – straight ahead or to the sides – and act on my gut intuition accordingly, within the bounds of the carriage. I'm willing to fight and work as needed to



defend and define myself, but I also depend on the construction and strength and protection of the vehicle, and the armor afforded to me in the context of this universe and this identity.

So what this all means in down-to-earth conscious terms is that there are opportunities for me to extend or make the best of this situation. And there is movement; constant movement. I start off undeveloped, I continually fill up, and yet my destination is still unformed and undeveloped as a cloud. Just as the stomach and bowels constantly (amazingly) recreate themselves, and reform and transform their contents, I am in a constant cycle of change and reformation. I am in a purgatory where my sins have been washed and processed, and continue to be cleansed of any impurities, ever further and finer, until weaknesses become strengths. One small achievement at a time, one step at a time, with due care and humility, leads to impressive victories and wonderful quantum leaps.

The path to victory starts with struggle and persistent overcoming of oneself and one's obstacles in life. It starts with mundane or even frustrating tasks and projects. And it starts with the realization that victory is not what the world might suggest; it is not merely a crushing act, nor brute force, nor intimidation. On the contrary, victory is subtlety overcoming density, and spirit dominating the forms.

I try to emulate this pattern of mind over matter, and in the process I realize that there is no detail too small, no activity too insignificant. The conscious and unconscious are equally important, and they are creatures that draw the chariot of the world forward without any reins. And only by trusting in these two contrasting forces, these creatures, do I leave my hands and my mind free to look around and become creative myself. This involves being observant and careful to understand both creatures, which requires the will to dare, to remain silent, to know, and to try. Which often begins with a sincere prayer, or a question, like, "Am I really aware and observant enough to hear the voice of an angel when called?"

It also involves responding to such promptings quickly and attentively, not with fear but with faith. Have I really chosen my master today? If so, and if I've chosen wisely, then I can trust my instincts and act in faith without any need to second-guess those promptings. It means admitting when I feel fear or doubt, and then having the courage and humility to supplicate to Deity; to ask that my nervous fears be superseded by faith and confidence. And of course, having personal integrity so that I know my word is valid, and God is listening.

(Aside: in my view, faith is not just some religious-fringe topic; it's the root of intellectuality. It is a required facet of reasoning and recursive logic. As a child I intuitively understood recursive reasoning, yet later in life I forgot amidst the noise of a material world that assaulted me and everybody else.)



It wasn't until late thirties that I began to re-root into rational thinking, and to conscientiously choose to exercise real faith again. Of course, I still slip into erroneous, faithless patterns of thought, and it is a work in progress, but it is clear to me now that only through this sort of humble faith do I feel proud of Our Creator and also cautiously optimistic about all humanity as well. I feel better connected to every part of my body, and better able to be a steward and warden of my faculties and feelings. This translates into a better connection with other humans and the Earth around, as well. I don't believe that "I am the One" or that I will solve all the world's problems, but rather I trust I can solve my set of assigned problems while others will effectively solve the rest. This faith and knowledge and assurance come with a great sense of gratitude, which in turn is a sense of being more-fully awake.

As I spend more time incarcerated, I hope to be more aware of others; not only family and friends on the outside, but also fellow inmates, officers, staff, and complete strangers. Admittedly I have a long way to go, but at least the desire to be more aware and sensitive of others' needs and desires has been planted. And I realize it's the only way to form meaningful relationships. One of my goals for this week is to avoid criticizing, condemning, and complaining. It's a goal that I find myself resetting every week (or every time I goof). When I first made this goal several months ago, I had to restart the attempt every day! It's not as easy as I thought it should be! But I'll keep improving.

Another goal is to be sincerely interested in others. It's a work in progress, but clearly it's the only way to achieve lasting and loving friendships. Thus far I've been selfish too often, so there's plenty of room for improvement here. And it's a cliché, I know, but life really is more enjoyable and fulfilling when I lose myself in the service of others, and/or collaborate with others. It feels good to at least recognize the path forward, and to have a moral compass, leading me toward a brighter future if I'll remain faithful. Obviously it doesn't mean sacrificing morals to win over 'friends' or gain glory; it's just a simple and practical model toward greater happiness and true friendships. Life's more interesting when I get outside my own problems.

Beforehand if I read something or tried listening to others, I had difficulty connecting and relating with the other. I was too scatterbrained to focus; obsessive and compulsive, and selfish. I still operate with a fairly high level of ambitious energy, but I'm learning to meditate and truly concentrate. What a long way I have to go! – At least it feels that way. Life and the physical world move too slowly and clunky for my mind sometimes, but I've learned to appreciate slowing down and just gazing, or worshipping during a worship service. I've become more capable of being persistent and long lasting in my effort – without any tweak or caffeine or anything else required.



So I'm learning to practice meditation and concentration; to focus on one single point or part of the mind, like a single rose or a single bird to admire for its beauty forever. And in this practice comes an appreciation for the ripe field of life all around, even when I'm feeling a bit lost or abandoned. I can still recognize and praise God for His love, science and arts, energy, companionship, renown, and all fortune as well. I still struggle with setbacks and distractions and frustration, of course, and I must retreat sometimes from my impetuosity, but I've felt and observed significant progress. Persistence and perseverance are essential to the practice, and it is fun to see what my friends and I can do with faith in the Lord, not waiting on signs, but recognizing all the signs; putting forth my own effort and having faith in a greater outcome. May God help us all master meditation and concentration!

Teamwork is an important part of the puzzle. That is to say: serious teamwork, not lightweight tomfoolery. It's amazing to see what happens when people put their best foot forward and stay strong as individuals who contribute to the whole. The individual contribution is all-important! I can't stress that enough. And yet we must appoint and accept assistance along the path for greatest effectiveness and success. Laying out grand plans and putting in the steady time and effort, assigning and delegating along the way, seem to produce amazing results every time.

How wonderful it is to see the fruits of a group effort! – Of brainstorming and of trust; trusting others, with care and caution, to perform miracles and to meet us half way. This becomes an ongoing process of adjustment, in which listening to feedback and fine-tuning efforts are critical. We must truly appreciate the work and contributions of others; most especially those of God Almighty. This is not the time to become complacent or to rest easy as if we've arrived! On the contrary, we are in the first phase of development, yet unformed, yet filling up, as a ripe field after a thunderous downpour.

Sometimes big changes occur, which keep us on our toes. Like when they recently called out over the PA system to tell my last Bunkie that he's been placed in a county jail. "Roll up your stuff as soon as you can and bring it out to the control room," the officer instructed him. He had a good job here, and many good friends, but now he would have to move on into the unknown. There are lots of mixed emotions across the board; some expressed, some buried and hidden, as we attempt to make sense of it all, and to take some control of our lives as best we can. And amidst changes and setbacks – some forward and some in retreat – we do our best to heed the counsel of the Spirit, who reminds that victory is the sum of will power and experience, and that ultimately, mind prevails over matter, spirit rules over form, and subtleness dominates density. My Bunkie's departure was a reminder that the material, temporal, fleeting stuff doesn't matter much.



What matters most is the eternal motion picture, and there's no sense in becoming too attached to any particular physical comfort. We have to let go and move on, and trust in God, even if it means retreating in bloody pain sometimes, in order to re-group and re-center – to really concentrate by binding to a single location in the mind, and then take a positive step forward toward happiness and eternal life. Amidst all the changes, God and the Spirit are unchanging, and are willing to listen to our prayers for stability and peace. It's nice to be in good company!

Falling back on memories of the past is a pretty regular occurrence for me, partially by choice and partially by apparent compulsion outside of my control. I'm constantly busy with various activities, but I still look back quite often to happy, inspiring times, and occasionally back to confusing or negative, traumatic events in my life. The Spirit is constantly (or at least very often) working in and around my life to keep me in tune, in balance, and in remembrance of who I am. I appreciate the reminders and the trust afforded me by the Spirit, really.

At this stage of my life – I'm thirty-nine years old – I have a better understanding of spiritual matters, so I'm more integrated and discerning than I was a few years ago. Back then I was extremely haunted by the demons I'd invited into my life haphazardly. My trust – in others and in myself – has increased, and I've felt a sense of peace and loose relaxation to counterbalance the stress in my life. I'd lost the ability to make covenants with God for some time, but now I feel a restored capacity to make oaths and covenants with our Maker and myself.

Along with this feeling comes a sense of responsibility and humility. It feels like I've regained (and am regaining) the ability to communicate after having lost my voice for a while. It's coming along step-by-step. I'm a different man now, and I should be. I'm no longer addicted to adrenaline and to other spirits who would make a mockery of my life and of life in general. So it feels like I've returned to my adolescent, child-like mind, and learning is fun again. Hard work is worthwhile, and persistence is vital, and perhaps most importantly: I remember who I am. I don't plug into TVs or radios or CD players to drown out or program my thoughts, nor do I need to keep current on gossip or sensational news. I feel more reconnected to my spirit. In fact, whereas I had begun to identify as a spiritless body – an empty vessel without agency, totally dependent upon external stimuli for motivation or inspiration – now I identify as a spirit who stays in connection with not only my own body-vessel, but also with other spirits. It's a process of reintegration, and an ongoing eternal balancing act, but at least I'm aware of the due mean now, and actively making connections. I'm actually choosing to tune in, and choosing subtle over dense, mind over matter and spirit over form.



Sometimes this involves taking proactive steps toward a goal; other times retracting to respect boundaries or to simplify. It's quite a balancing act!

Just today I fell off center again. I forgot to watch my breath, so to speak, due to being overly ambitious and anxious about finishing some work assignments. I was somewhat impatient in certain interactions with others who either directly or indirectly asked for my time. One might assume that a prisoner feels no sense of urgency, because he has time on his hands, but the fact is: work hours are numbered and limited, so we have to budget our time accordingly.

Admittedly, I allow this scarcity of time to control me too much sometimes, but how else am I going to get anything done? I realize I ought to be focusing on serving others, but I have to accomplish my own set of tasks and responsibilities in order to feel useful and to make contributions. And "serving others" can become watered down to nothingness if I don't take care to prioritize and focus.

If I forget whom I serve, and fall away by listening to either my own heart or the voice of others excessively, then I fall off track and need to repent again.

This repentance usually starts with a silent prayer, like the one I feel compelled to offer now: "Please Lord, will you forgive me and elevate my tone – from the saturnine spirit which I allowed to possess my thoughts today, to a higher level? Please cast out the dead, heavy weight, and transform the old slithering snake that revolves around his sunstone, into an eagle that clutches the sacramental Eucharist and prepares to soar once again."

It's difficult to be isolated from relationships and to start over from scratch. The folklore about rampant homosexuality in prison seems to be exaggerated, but based on the truth, because the inmates here face a peculiar sort of desperation for human love and contact. Some of the men here feel emasculated and embrace their feminine side. We may never have worried about gaining or achieving the love of another man before in our lives, because after all, who needs men when he has women? The flirting that goes on between the guys – game-playing and dirty-joking and ass-grabbing – seems to fulfill a need for human contact, emotional exchange and interaction. And there's a positive side to this: a sort of rare male bonding that is admirable. Outside prison, guys seem to get attention from girls too easily, so codependent relationships form. These codependent relationships not only self-destruct most of the time, but also form to the exclusion of good friendships outside the principal codependent relationship. So normally – at least in my experience – guys don't strive to make good (creative, loving, productive, rewarding) relationships with each other, because they take their guy friends for granted.



They get all the 'love' they need from a female companion, or so they assume. It's 'girly' or 'sissy' or 'weak' or 'homosexual' to love other men, so men mask their playful child within a homophobic shell. And you get the typical Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde scenario where the most flaming, hidden, repressed homosexual of all is the one expressing his tough-guy machismo and masculinity, or insulting the queers.

There's potential for imbalance on both sides of the scale, as usual. One thing is certain: we cannot rely on outside relationships to sustain us, even if we have visitors every week. Inmate-to-inmate bonding is critical to mental health, and it promotes life skills for the long haul.

Relationships with staff and volunteers are also critical, but perhaps most important – even more important than relationships with family and friends – is a sound relationship with oneself: a relationship that seems to develop most impressively and significantly through writing, in my opinion. Not just an occasional note to self, but a persistent and searching probe into self, consistently and with discipline. Regular writing on a set schedule, even if it's inconvenient, has helped me immensely. I feel good about the progress I've made so far toward reintegration with my true self, through writing. I'm actively working on a book besides this essay, and I'm also facilitating a writing class in which we'll focus on writing our own life stories.

Furthermore, I'm taking part in a transitional program, which is also writing intensive. My handwriting – when writing fast – is terrible! But it's legible enough for me to read and edit, revise and finalize later. Just putting the pen to paper with purpose is valuable. Of course I'm also engaged in academic studies and writing as well, but the personal writing is some of the most important. Who was I, which mistakes have I made, and who do I really want to be? Who have I always been but may have forgotten? How can I program my thoughts to ascend? What is my story?

The religious rituals and ordinances of my youth basically breezed past me because I was too torn apart and distracted; lacking real connection with my spirit, others' spirits, and The Spirit. It seems that society and church and my own ego all wanted to turn me into a soulless machine, and as a result I lost touch and became a slave to passions and addictions. So I'm working on reconnecting now. Not to convince anybody; just to be whole.

I find myself writing letters less often lately, but feeling more "real" and sincere in the letters that I do write. I'm in the process of reintegrating with the religion of my youth, but now it's my religion, not just some ancient, worn-out tradition of my ancestors, or parents, or siblings. It's more personal now.



And my relationship with the Spirit is my own, not just some vague borrowed story reference. I'm not a mindless slave to audio tunes or video games, or thrills like sex and drugs and alcohol. I have a life ahead of me now, and it's my life, under God, unlike the drone-style "life" I lived in the past. I lived in relative solitude before, while now I feel more collected and connected with the hive.

At least I feel that way if I'm holding to good habits and routines, staying up, challenging myself, and associating with those who are resourceful and task-oriented; those who work and trust in a greater plan, and believe that we can do anything with God. Obviously we have to check ourselves and guard against pride, but we must keep going and use our talents even (especially) when faced with a struggle. And on a personal level, good habits help, like studying and writing, or singing in the choir, or public speaking, or computer programming, or teaching, etc.... It's a daily balancing act, which is so much easier when we have some camaraderie.

One coping strategy I've used too often is that of complaining. I try to avoid it, and I'm trying to keep a positive attitude and affect change where possible, but admittedly I still complain. Sometimes the complaining seems to be a healthy part of standard communication – i.e., venting – if it's expressed in a safe way to somebody who understands. And sometimes complaining is a part of being assertive, to correct real problems. But oftentimes it's just petty and pessimistic, especially when the complaining is divisive; i.e. "us versus them". I hear complaints about the amount of time we have to serve, the quality of the food, the injustice and stupidity of the 'system' or certain officials, the unfairness or illegality of the Board, the rude or callous treatment from staff members, or other inmates. As you can imagine, it turns into a soap opera around here sometimes over the pettiest of issues. It seems that when people run out of problems, they'll create more problems to feel normal and to cope, so it's a chore to ensure we stay focused on the *real* problems and goals we really care about. Otherwise we'll be sucked into a downward spiral of negativity and other distractions.

Anyway, the stress of life is quite formidable. If it isn't one thing it's another. And that's one of the beauties of life, isn't it? The pressure is refining, if we manage it well. And perhaps the best way to manage the opposition is to start by asking ourselves a question, daily if possible: Who am I really, and what do I stand for? What do I care about? What can I do to be creative and constructive today... right now? What should I do today, to be where I want to be tomorrow?