

Heart of the Lesson

by Todd Leatherland

Lying somewhere at the core of every individual circumstance of life the heart of the lesson may be found. Nowhere does this prove more evident than in the dynamic that is contained inside the prison system. Within the constant friction that occurs as a result of authoritarian interaction a pattern begins to emerge, a truth of human nature. This pattern, if one conditions himself to recognize it, can be utilized in any and all situations as a means to overcome the challenges we face in our environment. Each and every day, all throughout life. In order to find this wisdom, in the pattern, a person must develop the ability to see beyond the distinct elements unique to each challenge; to the heart lying at the center of it. It is at this point where victory is in view, and self-mastery becomes a possibility. This possibility, however, is not as simple as it seems, because it requires rigorous honesty and the development of proactive behavior. Nonetheless, when we strive to strip down our interactions in life, to the essence of the matter we can then use all of the obstacles in our path as the catalyst for personal growth and foundational building blocks.

All throughout our lives we will all be faced with adversity, hardships, and personal dilemmas; especially within the confines of the prison system, and the rigors of an incarcerated life. There is no better place to test oneself and develop self-mastery. Here we are in the wilderness, and the wilderness is the best teacher of all. Here we must operate under a strenuous set of rules. As a direct subsequent effect of those rules we must also submit ourselves to authority. As we begin to analyze the nature of authority and the dynamic pressures it exerts on us individually, as well as collectively, an opportunity arises

to improve our functionality within an authoritarian system, and also the way to react to it. This is where the quest begins to discover the heart of the lesson.

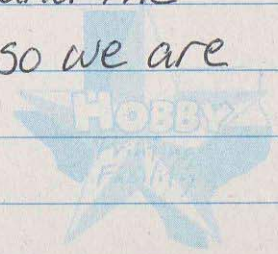
Inevitably, during the normal course of life, on any given day a point of contact will occur in which we find ourselves face to face with authority. It is at this critical point where our reaction to the prison dynamic is at the most volatile, and emotions can become enflamed. This is where patience is tested, and our own frustrations begin to manifest. There are many variables in operation at these moments, and a myriad of forces at play which influence our reactions and decisions. Yet, when we allow them to cloud our vision and overcome our reason we lose sight of ourselves and the lesson in the midst of the chaos. Truthfully, not all interactions with authority are intensely dramatic. Many are mundane and uneventful. At these we hardly take notice. But many result in friction and even conflict. Yet, no matter what the circumstances are there always is an underlying theme in which we must focus on. This is the pattern we must grasp, and this is where the simple yet potent wisdom of life can be attained.

There are many reasons why we feel as we do being incarcerated. In a sense, we have been stripped of our dignity, and all that is human. We find ourselves dwelling in a world of chaos and sorrow. A place in which being treated inhumane is normal, and sanity is a matter of perspective. Frustration is a natural bi-product of this type of environment and it manifests itself in our inter-personal relationships. Anger and pride become a badge of honor which binds us to our surroundings, and the very

● authority we have come to despise. We find purpose in our frustrations, and become attached to them. In a twisted sense, we feel entitled to these negative emotions to the degree that they give us a reason for being. They become a life-line to real feelings again. It is in this raw and painful state where the true extent of our accrued lifetime damages are realized, and healing is found needed.

Most of the time, however, this healing is never received, and the damages are left like a war torn landscape strewn across our lives. The pressures of an incarcerated existence only fester the wounds. Then when the oppressive structure of the authority we are under eliminates our options we naturally rebel. That rebellious reaction is ● unhealthy ^{and} hinders every aspect of our growth. Like a caged animal we find ourselves always reacting to situations, and lashing out at the face of authority. Then when all of this becomes overwhelming we fall back into the same negative behavior patterns that we sought relief from in the past. This is the grueling continuation of the same vicious cycle which perpetuates the downward spiral of negativity so predominant in the lives of the incarcerated. We are unable to discover any of the subtle nuances about ourselves because we are being controlled by all of the external factors that bombard us continually. This must be recognized and overcome.

We must learn to notice the specific external factors that are at work whenever we are interacting with authority, and the ● personal elements that represent authority. By doing so we are then able to isolate the essence of the matter.



There will be times when we feel justified in our emotions and reactions. If we place our focus there, and rebellion is allowed to blossom. We will begin to look at this event as a matter of personal rights. All of the negative aspects of our lives will begin to be projected upon the implementation of authority, and we lose focus on the heart of the lesson. When we take a stand for self-justification we actually lose ground in the arena of personal growth. When we react negatively to our environment we actually hinder ourselves while propelling further into our negative and damaged existence. We become part of the problem instead of the solution. The key to this concept is to recognize this proactively and make solid choices based on positive tools. Tools that are developed, nurtured, and selected during these points of contact. This is done by learning the lesson present in the various interactions all throughout our lives. When we see life for what it is with a clear vision unclouded by negative thought; then self-mastery is in view.

By ~~achieving~~ achieving these moments of clarity we begin a journey of self-discovery. A door is opened for heightened states of social consciousness, personal awareness, and spiritual growth. We take back control. This is the point where we begin to possess, in abundance, qualities of a strong moral character. We find our true self in the midst of the tempest and gain strength from it. As we are tried in the furnace of affliction we knowingly reach into our established reserves from past lessons, and become tempered like steel. We learn how to deal with life on life's terms, and are all the wiser for it. There are qualities that become a reality like dignity, integrity, and honor. We also operate separate from others who have not learned these lessons, and are able to meet them where they are at. When we achieve

● this level we become an example to others, and to authority. We become masters of our own existence. We regain control of our lives. We become the lesson. It is through the submission to authority that we actually free ourselves, ~~we~~ gain ~~we~~ peace, and discover the heart of truth.

The challenge that every individual faces in life is finding this truth. The truth itself is absolute. Yet, our realization and understanding of it is unique. Our experiences reflect our perspective of it, and its application in our lives. This is the reason that it is not easily defined in an exact sense. Only in a general way can it be discussed before it must be brought out of the realm of theory into a real life

● practical application. In this way ^{it} varies and is case specific. We must discover the heart of the lesson for ourselves, and learn to activate it dynamically through our life encounters. As the emerging pattern materializes; the truth becomes our focus, and sets us free from all the vices that bind us, including authority. This truth delivers us from the captivity and becomes our foundation. We no longer strive against our environmental factors. But instead find harmony with them. Peace ensues and liberation is realized.

Capturing the very essence of the lesson, the central core, the heart and soul of it is a life long process. It is filled with challenges, ~~and~~ ^{yet} ultimately it will define us. How to handle a life under authority in the face of adversity is a reality

● that anyone "inside the walls" knows all too well. In a deep and intimate way we are connected with our environment in a symbiotic relationship. What we think, speak, and do, whether

good or evil, impacts our surroundings in profound, powerful, and even surprising ways. Should ~~we~~ we ^{not} be mindful of them? Should we not gain awareness through critical thinking, and participate in creating a more positive reality for ourselves and future generations? These relevant questions face each of us as we navigate through incarceration on the path back to society. The answers are the keys which unlock the truth found hidden in every lesson. The heart of which strives for purity and honesty. It is the rhythmic cadence of the pulse of ourselves which brings life to the world and purpose to our lives. It is the point when we master our surroundings, and we reach a new level of maturity. The student becomes the teacher... even to authority.

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