

The Power of Honesty and Forgiveness

By

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I wake up every morning to the sound of someone breaking in my front door. As the grogginess of a restless night wears off, memories flood my mind of a party, loud music...the artificial dulling of alcohol plays upon my consciousness. Oh wait...that's just the first watch guy unlocking the food port. Zero five-hundred hours time to get up and...damn! I'll never get used to this cold concrete floor first thing in the morning.

How did my life come to this? It wasn't supposed to be like this. I was a good kid, I was doing well in school, I played football, and I wrestled. How did I end up doing this life without parole sentence and hundred or more years to do after I've died and miraculously come back three times? What happened to me?

"Man [Freud] postulated, is doomed to suffer or destroy....My own belief is that man has the capacity as well as the desire to develop his potentialities and become a decent human being, and that these deteriorate if his relationship to others and hence to himself is, and continues to be, disturbed. I believe that man can change and go on changing as long as he lives."

As I first read those words by psychologist Karen Horney, written in 1945, they seemed to be speaking directly to me. They spoke to me at a time when I was questioning myself and the purpose of my life. Every time I seemed to regain my feet, something or someone would kick my legs out from under me. I began to feel like I was wasting my time. It was a familiar feeling to me. I had been there before, several years

earlier, before I had made all of the changes in my life, before I had loosed the demons from my mind, my heart, and my spirit.

These demons still haunt me if I am to be honest with you and more importantly if I am to be honest with myself. I may never completely overcome them, but I am comfortable with their presence, they have become a part of my past and I understand their influences on me then, and now. Perhaps, I chose to hang onto them because they are reminders of the depths to which I have fallen when I became complacent in my life.

In this way, my demons act as sentinels, guarding against a repeat of my history, of their history. I have matured a lot in the past decade. I am no longer the naive eighteen year old, who has spent over a decade of his life in a shell, in a near comatose state from drugs and alcohol, coming up to breathe again only in short spurts of soon to be snuffed out hope, and the next decade of his life incased in a concrete and concertina wire coffin living a macabre version of what life could've been.

Through out a significant portion of my life I had unconsciously become what other people thought I was. I had elected not to care about what I wanted because it was too much for me to care about. I have taught myself the tools necessary to constructively confront and resolve those problems I do encounter. Writing about it now makes it all seem easier than it was in the living of it. There were times when I wanted to run for the hills screaming for mercy, comfort and the protection of avoidance.

"None of it matters anyway" had been my mantra for far too long. I had given control of my life over to not only other people, but to the circumstances that are created by other people with their own agenda's and goals, and perhaps carelessness. It was a long process for sure. Rome wasn't built in a day.

As cliché as it sounds I woke up one day and as I laid there looking at the bare concrete wall I realized, "This isn't me!" I was living my life the way other people wanted me to. I wasn't making any choices for myself. I wasn't planning my journey of life, I was sort of wondering through the desert of non-existence. I was just sort of there; there was no meaning in my life. I had to go through all of the messiness that has been my life, the mistakes, the disappointments, the addictions, the set backs all of the pain, anger and frustration that had so embroiled my adolescence. I had to throw in a fair amount of public ridicule and embarrassment. I have come to believe it is part of life to make choices and decisions in our lives that are just not the right ones for us to make. We make the best choices that we are capable of at the time that we make them, no matter how horrendous they seem to us twenty years later. We fall down all the time, the trick is getting up on more time than we fall.

As I matured I began to see many of the patterns in my life that have led me to prison. It was this cognitive processing of my life, the awareness of those patterns, such as my use of alcohol and drugs to self medicate against my inability to confront the world on an emotional level, which allowed me to draw from my experiences the lessons that changed my life. I learned from all of those times when I withdrew myself emotionally from other people and the world at large that I wasn't being who I really am. I was being someone that I wasn't which allowed my alter self to become stronger and more prevalent in my life. Learning that in my own time and in my own way was a very powerful experience for me. It was a lesson that was life changing in ways that I could never have imagined.

Somehow, I had become so entrenched in the day-to-dayness of my life that I had lost sight of anything else. My sphere of concern had so collapsed in on me that

everyday was a struggle to fight through the most mundane of things. I woke up each morning with no other goal than to see what today would bring and to get through the day. Hoping that when it was all over I could lay my head on the same pillow that night and go to sleep. I had no goals other than to wake up the next day and do it all over again. That was one hell of an accomplishment in my world. Somewhere along the line I had lost track of where I was in my life, week to week, month to month, year to year. I was just sort of along for the ride; I had been for a long time.

I had no sense of who I was because I was too busy being who I wasn't. I had not invested any effort into finding out the truth of myself.

This was the next stage of my life. It was progress, just acknowledging that much. You have to know you're lost, or at least acknowledge it as a possibility, before you can reach into your pocket and pull out the compass to get yourself back on track.

So, I acknowledged that I was lost; I reached into my back pocket and pulled out...pocket lint. No, that can't be right. I had it here a moment ago.

We use our understandings of ourselves, the world around us and the relationship between the two to gauge our sense of direction in our lives. We are ultimately actors in a cosmic play, only there is no script. We are all writing it as we go. What we do today on the stage of our lives, will affect what the other actors can do, what we ourselves can do, tomorrow.

Our compass is all of those things we use to modify or direct our thinking, our attitudes and our behavior. If we believe that there is a cure for cancer, then we may direct everything we do in our lives to achieving that end. We will study hard in middle school. We will find enjoyment in such things as biology and mathematics because we

know how these things fit into our vision of our life, our contribution to the world; they will be necessary tools if we are to discover the cure for cancer in our life time.

Everything we do in our lives brings us closer to the realization of our goal, that one thing that we do with our lives that changes everything, not for us but the world.

I had to realize that my old compass was exactly what I no longer had available to me. It was that old system of beliefs and ideas, the old self concept that I was trying to overcome, that had now become my worst enemy. I couldn't use it to find my way again because it is what got me lost in the first place. I had no watch by which to gauge true north, and even if I did the sun was obstructed by all the clouds that threatened to unleash a torrential downpour upon me at any moment.

Maybe it was inevitable, that there would come a time when I could no longer afford that luxury. I was no longer content to dwell in the present under the shadow of the past. I had to come to realize a state of psychological and emotional maturity that denied me the comfort of blaming other people for the woes of my existence. I took a long look at my life and realized that I didn't see any thing meaningful, of value. I wasn't doing anything. As hard as it is to write now, I didn't see the purpose of my life. Where was it all going? What was the point of it all? What did it mean?

When most kids were developing a cognitive vision of themselves I lived in a world filled only with myself and my anger, pain and isolation. The development of my sense of who I was had become stagnated. The development of an internal sense of identity was never initiated, let alone actualized. I withdrew from social interactions with other people. I didn't develop the normal social abilities, the internalization of social expectations and evaluations, the rules and responsibilities that would allow me to grow emotionally and psychologically as a competent and autonomous human being. My

interactions with people older than me didn't allow me to naturally progress through the stages of psycho-emotional development as an adolescent, or to incorporate a stable concept of societal expectations, and norms into my self identity.

The result of all of this was that because I felt isolated I created that state in my life by pushing everyone out of it, I then created a fictional version of myself. This fictional version was so emotionally detached from people that his world seemed to only encompass himself. There was no one else within the sphere of his reality. He lacked the ability to create and maintain meaningful relationships with other people. More importantly this fictional me lacked the desire to interact on a significantly meaningful level.

I had withdrawn so far into myself I could not see where I had been, let alone where I was going.

I began to look at the system of beliefs that I had accepted, constructed and integrated into my life both before prison and during the past decade. Each time I would discharge a little more of it. I was still hanging onto large parts of it because I was scared to just start over. I still don't believe in the ability to hit reset, but I have learned that how you view your life impacts how you are willing to live it.

The Power of Honesty

I have spent the last twelve years of my life thinking about what I have done yesterday to get me where I am today. I use that metaphor a lot, the whole yesterday and today thing. When you're doing life time stops to mean what it once did. "Yesterday" is now simply a reference to the past, and has come to mean both a specific day and the whole experience of the past. "Yesterday" has come to encompass not only the physical events but the emotional impact of those events upon me in my "here and

now,” and the impact of those events on the lives of others and undeniably my own future.

Not a moment passes without me thinking back to some event in my life and trying to trace the ripples which seem to flow from it. This has become an almost religious practice. Trying to find the subtle ways things are connected, how they have affected events years, decades later has become like a ritual I perform without as part of my obligation to remember the past. It is an obligation I owe the past; that I owe to what has happened. It is just something I do almost unconsciously in those quiet moments when I can still my mind long enough to disentangle myself from the exterior noise of the world around me.

Being honest about my past and what I have done is very hard for me. I have done things in my life that I am not proud of, things that I would take back, or undo if I could. If we are to understand who and where we are in our lives, we must admit it all to ourselves, and then others. We must do so with all of the accompanying fear and trepidation that accompanies such honesty.

Honesty is rarely an all at once kind of thing. There are some things that you just can't be honest about until you are honest about others. You have to walk the minefield very carefully disarming each piece of the past in turn until you have a clear path.

The catch is you'll be back going over it all over and over again like some weird twisted version of *deja vu*. You will revisit these things continuously over many, many years. As your understanding of yourself and everything you've been through increases your ability to be honest about what has been and what you've done to get you where you are will find renewed vigor, new capacity and new depth. As you peel back the layers you will find new meaning, and new significance in old and familiar ideas,

experiences and beliefs. Your frame of reference changes as you learn and mature, and so does your understanding of yourself.

I have found being honest with myself had to be done in small doses. When I first started looking for answers about my life, the last place I was willing to look was my life. I looked every where else but the one place I needed to, in the one place that had all the answers. I wasn't ready to look at the internal causes and circumstances of my existence. I was scared to admit these things, especially to myself. What makes it worse is that even if I had been willing to peel back the covers of my life, I didn't have the eyes to see what was there. That would be something I would need to develop and nurture as I went.

I had to develop the willingness to look at my past whole heartedly and with honest eyes. I had to mature to the point where I was not only willing but capable of seeing where I had been, what I had done and how, even if in some small way, the past was connected to the present and maybe even the future.

Honesty is a powerful thing, a life changing thing. Honesty has the power to dissolve the self doubt and lack of understanding that allows despair and hopelessness to creep into our lives; to destroy the shadows in which the monsters of self loathing, self hatred, misery and anger hide. I have come to learn that it is also something that is in practice so easy that it is too easy to take it all for granted and not practiced as much as it should be.

I had to be honest with myself. I had to be honest with myself about who I am, how I view myself, and what beliefs and ideas I hold to be true. I have to be honest with myself about my crimes. I had to acknowledge my attitude about my crime, my actions,

and other people's actions. Most importantly I had to be honest about how all of these different elements came together in the circumstance of my crimes.

I then had to be honest about my life, my story. I had to discover the truth about where I have been, where I am now, and where I am going.

I had to learn how events like my grandmother's death and my inability to confront and process my grief then had been responsible for my development of some catastrophically bad habits; habits that I would use over and over again through the years in place of an effective emotional intelligence which would allow me to process grief and experience happiness and joy later in my life.

I had to learn how and why my best friend was as important to me as she is, and how her death would snuff out my ability to form emotional attachments with other people, especially women. I would have to come to understand what she meant to me and why before I would be able to learn how to form a meaningful relationship with another human being.

I had to understand why I couldn't trust anyone until I could trust myself.

An important part of being honest about my crimes was becoming aware of all those situations which contributed to the circumstances that allowed me to be in the environment I find myself and the mental state I was in all of these things were like pieces of a puzzle and came together in the final explosive reality during those chaotic months before my arrest and which ultimately cost people their lives. First, there was a series of choices I made which led me to be in that specific place at that specific time. I had to find the thread of factors that strung those choices together. There were situational factors which led me to participate in the commission of these offenses. I had to learn what these were, and how to identify them in the future.

I have wrestled for a long time with how to deal with the reality of my crimes. There is nothing that I can do to repair the physical ramifications of those events. Three human beings lost their lives as a result of choices I have made in my life. The emotional trauma is like a slow healing bruise upon countless lives. The ramifications of those choices have impacted the lives of an immeasurable number of other people.

No matter how hard it is for me to admit to myself or to others my exact role in these senseless acts and the pain I have participated in bringing to the lives of all of those people it has been a necessary part of my transforming my attitudes, the depth and complexity of my beliefs and and therefore my life.

Like a stone tossed haphazardly into a pond, the ripples of those choices, those acts, reach the farthest shores. I had to discover how I felt about my crimes. I had to admit the facts of my guilt, my remorse, and perhaps most importantly my confusion.

It is something which unfortunately is not talked about, here very much. If we do, it is done in the sacred halls of seclusion. We don't talk about what we've done to come to prison. We don't talk about the elephant in the room. Everyone knows it is there, but we dress it up and put our spin on it, calling it by any other name but what it is, we avoid the truth.

We avoid the truth like it was a plague, and may be it is. By admitting the truth the fantasy world we have created for ourselves disappears. All of the hatred that fuels your anger is seen for what it is, fear and grief. It is the fear of not being good enough; it is the fear of failing again and finding that everyone is right you are worthless. It is grief for yourself, your life misspent and now wasting away in a prison that will be on this earth longer than you are.

Eventually, that grief will turn into remorse and sorrow. It will turn into tears for the victims, for their families and friends, for their children who no longer have parents because you took them away forever.

In prison, your life is so hectic, there is so much going on that it is easy to get lost in the "yard shit." He has to sacrifice his humanity if he is to survive in here. The daily events on any level four prison yards are enough to drive a sane man insane. The constant state of tension and high level of stress that most prisoners deal with on a daily basis is dramatic, to say the least. You don't have the time for self reflection or the luxury. Prison culture plays off your insecurities; cultural norms define social perceptions of weakness and inferiority and peer pressure keeping us from being honest with ourselves.

It wasn't until I "locked it up" that the atmospheric noise subsided enough to allow me to hear my own thoughts and the recriminations of my conscience. Both had been there the whole time, just below the level of my awareness. There was just too much on the surface for me to realize what was going on underneath it all.

Honesty with my self was an expression of the highest level of personal integrity for me. Having overcome so much of my emotional numbness in my own life, numbness towards my own pain and personal life experiences allowed me to begin the long process of reconciling the impact of my actions on other people, of healing the personal wounds of self hatred and self doubt which festered in my mind, body and spirit.

Being honest with ourselves doesn't mean that we get to pick and chose what we are honest about, you can't lie about what you've done, you can't justify it by saying this happened so I did that. Honesty is about declaring what actually happened and

accepting things the way they are, the way they really are, and about accepting responsibility both for your actions and for their repercussions.

My crimes impacted a lot of people. The victims in my crimes lost their lives. That is something that I can not change. The friends and family of these men undoubtedly felt overwhelmed by the suddenness and inexplicable nature of what happened. Feelings of confusion, helplessness, terror and extreme vulnerability, followed by anger, guilt, suspicion, depression, meaninglessness, self-doubt, and regret are all emotional states common to victims, and their families, of violent crime.

The reality of having a loved one murdered through what must seem like an act of pure randomness leaves questions that linger and haunt a person for the rest of their lives. These experiences reach out carelessly and penetrate the lives of thousands of people, turning lives inside out and utterly destroying them. It affects their relationships with their children, partners, family and friends in ways that are unimaginable. It affects their ability to work in social environments, to earn a living. Their lives seem empty, painful and completely without meaning. Although the acts that constituted my crimes are over, many human beings carry the emotional scars that result from my careless acts.

I have caused other people to experience a level of hurt and suffering, of hopelessness and a sense of being out of control in their lives. Crime has real human consequences. It is unspeakable to me that somehow I had gotten to a place in my own life where I was not only willing, but capable of such evil.

That was part of being honest with myself, this acknowledging the affects of what I have done on other people. I had to admit that what I did affected not just the victim's family and friends, but their family and friends reaching out in a pattern of ever widening

concentric circles. I had to admit that these same concentric circles affected my own family and friends, and people I hadn't even known existed at the time I committed these acts of violence.

It was a long time in the making, and I have had to invest a lot of time and emotional energy to deal with it, and I may never be able to fully understand the impact my crimes have had on the friends and family of the people whose lives I have turned upside down.

Self Forgiveness

Self-forgiveness is an acknowledgement of the imprisoning power of the past and a conscious choice not to be bound by what can not be changed, but to channel the lessons contained in those mistakes and errors in judgment by integrating them into your consciousness and being aware of them so that they do not happen again.

As I learn who I am, as I experience my internal sense of being it is inevitable that I will also awaken a sense of responsibility and conscience. I have begun to view my life in light of the travesties I have visited upon others. It is not testimony to how evil I am but it is the act of embracing the sadness and sorrow I feel for causing those travesties.

Forgiving myself has been so hard for the exact reason that I really didn't know what it meant or what it involves. But if we fail to forgive ourselves for what we have done, we imprison ourselves; we chain ourselves to those things and deny ourselves the hope of personal freedom and growth. We relinquish control of our lives to the power of those acts. We become victims of our acts against others.

The death of anyone is important. Causing the death of another human being is a horrendous act, a tragedy with far reaching implications for all involved.

Forgiving myself meant reviewing the facts of what I had done, and how those actions affected so many people. It meant letting go of the unhealthy guilt and anger that I had about the things in my life that had already happened. They were in the past; there was nothing I could do about them. There was something I could do about the present and how I chose to allow the past to influence the present and the future.

I had to become aware of all of the ways in which the past invaded my life, of all of the ways in which my choices today were influenced by my choices yesterday. It too was a part of the process and was not something that I could do just once and be done with it.

No. Every interaction I had with others sort of fostered this disbelief in myself and the idea that maybe I did not deserve forgiveness. Sentencing someone to prison for the rest of their life is a message from society that says "We have determined that you will never be forgiven."

Forgiving myself meant that I had to face exactly what had occurred in my life. It meant that I had to understand exactly what I had done and take responsibility for those actions. It also meant that I had to avoid trying to blame things outside of my control. It meant that I could not pass blame onto something or someone other than myself. It was not justifying what I had done by explaining it away.

Part of learning to forgive myself for the way I had lived my life and what I had done was looking at the past and learning from it. I had a lot of lessons to learn, a lot of experiences and lessons which I needed to integrate into my life. As I worked at it I put my life back together a little more each day.

The purpose of forgiveness is not to provide excuses or lessen the severity of what has been done, but acknowledge it, all of it. It is an acknowledgement of the acts,

the feelings, and an acceptance of my own pain, and the pain that I have caused in the lives of others.

Self-forgiveness is not saying that what I have done is o.k., because it isn't. It is an acknowledgement of what I have done, and of the lessons I have learned. It is an acceptance of responsibility and a sense of accountability for what I have done and how what I have done has impacted the lives of literally hundreds of people.

It is an acknowledgement of my remorse, guilt and regret for what I have done in my life and in the lives of others. It is an acknowledgement of my sorrow and sadness for the pain and suffering that I have wrought in the lives of all of the people affected by the events of my crimes, and in my life.

Forgiving myself has meant the acknowledgement of three very important pieces of my new life. First, I had to acknowledge that my perspective on life needed some work. Second there were attitudes and behaviors that I needed to address, some causes that I needed to identify and develop responsible and creative resolutions for. Third, while I may not be able to change yesterday, I had to learn from it, I had to be willing to honestly and whole heartedly seek redemption, through how I live my life tomorrow. Only then, would I be able to make any of it mean anything.