

## Advice for those new to prison By Cedric B. Theus

I have been asked many times about how I got through almost twenty years in prison with my mind, body and spirit still in good condition. New prisoners often seek guidance from “veteran prisoners” on how to conduct themselves in order to minimize problems. That is the purpose of this composition.

Losing one’s freedom is one of the most traumatic experiences that a normal person can have. It is in the nature of most animals to resist being caged. When the hostile and negative environment of prison is added to one’s loss of freedom, it is no wonder many prisoners become depressed, delusional, hard-hearted, religious, or a combination of those states.

The first piece of advice I want to impart on anyone who may find himself or herself incarcerated is to be honest with your true self. No matter what your defense strategy is, or what you decide to tell others (**which could come back to hurt you legally**), be honest in your own thoughts. Unless you are 100% innocent, *meaning you have absolutely no knowledge of, or connection to, the crime(s)*, you need to accept the fact that choices you made are what caused your incarceration. That is not to say that you deserve the charges against you or the sentence that you have. The fact of the matter is the criminal justice system is not fair or perfect—and neither is life. However, it took laws to put you in prison so therefore using laws are the only way that you can get out.

If you feel that your conviction or sentence is unjust, take the time to learn what your rights are under the laws of your state and the U. S. Constitution. The criminal justice process can be confusing and complex to a novice. Legal professionals (attorneys, judges, etc.) study the law for years in order to get the expertise needed to have a chance at getting a favorable result in a criminal proceeding. You must study as well. [Note: reading law books, and learning on your own does not make you or anyone else, a lawyer]

Once you accept the role that you played in your incarceration, you have given yourself an opportunity to use your situation to grow. Freedom, your ultimate goal, should not be your primary goal. Your personal safety and well-being should be your main concern. You must strive daily against becoming a victim or product of your environment. Knowing yourself, and being honorable, will go a long way towards this goal.

Everyone has flaws. We must be honest within ourselves as to what those are. Know your limitations. Character flaws that were relatively minor in free society can be major in prison. Your attitude and perception must change. The people who make up your new community are not your average law abiding citizens. They are individuals who have committed murder, rape, robbery, theft and other crimes against family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, or just random people. The vast majority of prisoners do not care about you. Though they may act as friends, you must never forget whom you are dealing with. Those who you may have known on the outside may not be the same individuals that you once knew. Prison changes people—some for the better, but most for the worst.

However, there are some genuinely good and honorable people incarcerated in even the worst prisons. They can help bring the best out of you. To find them you will have to prove yourself as an honorable person as well. The adage 'birds of a feather flock together' ring true in the joint. But beware: most prisoners are not who they claim to be. Many inmates tend to embellish who they were before prison. Some also create new personas. It will be wise to believe your eyes more often than your ears.

I use the term honorable often because honor is an excellent quality for anyone to have whether in prison, in society, and in relationships. Honor will earn you a lot of respect in prison from staff and your fellow prisoners. To be honorable you must first respect yourself and others. You must be trustworthy and reasonable. You cannot hurt people unless it is necessary to protect yourself or someone else. True honor will not allow you to steal from others, use or manipulate them. An honorable person wants what is best for self and others. In addition, you have to mind your own business, and try not to get involved in things that do not concern you. The only exception is if it is to assist someone who truly needs and deserves your assistance.

If you are aware of yourself, others and your environment, you will likely be able to avoid problems before they occur, or at least solve them without doing something that will cause harm to yourself. If the basketball court or card table is a place where there is a lot of conflict, you may have to avoid those activities, or only play with people who you know can do those things drama-free. Be open to making sacrifices. Limit your interaction with people who are always in conflicts, or those who engage in negative activity.

In prison, there will also be conflict with staff. You must understand that correctional officers and staff have authority over you whether you think they should or not. However, this does not give them the right to mistreat or abuse you. Arguing with them will usually hurt the situation rather than help it. If you have a problem with a staff member, and you cannot reasonably address it with them at that time, be patient. You will never win a violent altercation with staff in the end. Try to talk to the person who has authority over the person with whom you have an issue. If that's not an option, find another officer who is reasonable and ask them to mediate. Respect goes a long way. If staff sees that you respect them and their job, you should not have too many problems with them.

No matter how much time you are doing, set positive goals for yourself. Finish your education, learn something new, exercise and take advantage of self-help groups (i.e. Alcoholics Anonymous, Toastmasters, Alternatives to Violence Project etc.). Most of all do not give up on your dreams or goals, even if they seem far away. Always keep that part of you and never give that away.

Finally, try to stay connected with family and friends. Make sure that you do not put too much pressure or unfair expectations on them. They are not responsible for your incarceration: you are. It is difficult for family and loved ones to see you in prison. They will never know exactly what you are going through, and you do not know what they are dealing with on the outside. Be mindful of their struggles. The best things that you can do are love and support one another through this difficult time. I hope that my words will help you through this transition. You can grow from your situation. There will be hard times but remember; what you put into your life will likely determine what you will get out of it.