

From the Ground Up

By

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Peer to Peer Mentorship is an integral aspect of humanizing the criminal justice system by encouraging; while at the same time empowering the persons most effected by the experience of incarceration – those who are serving the time. If men and women were afforded the opportunity to share their life experiences in whatever area of specialization or expertise they might have, a mutual benefit would be enjoyed by all those involved. In this way a person's sense of self isn't diminished but bolstered.

We all have roles and various skills that often make up a sense of who we are. Whether it be a career role or family role, everyone has a way of identifying themselves within the scope of the world in which they live. Often it's these very roles that provide our sense of worth. What happens when these roles are stripped from us? How does the stay at home mom cope with not being home with her children due to her incarceration? How does the stone mason make sense of his days when he sits idle staring out the window of a prison cell? Problems such as those are not addressed. Although there might be programs available for incarcerated persons to participate in, more often than not they are not focused on addressing this loss of identity.

For anyone who has never been incarcerated- it could be said by those who have that it is a dehumanizing experience. Upon arrest you are manacled, placed in handcuffs, in irons. Sometimes shackles are used to secure your person, often times connected to the handcuffs via a belly chain. Certainly not the type of jewelry folks shop around for. Once you are in custody, the intake process begins. You are photographed and fingerprinted. Stripped naked and made to dance the most inhumane version of the hocky-pocky imaginable. At this point you are given a uniform that never fits correctly with bold lettering signifying that you are an inmate or prisoner. By this time your sense of self has been thoroughly undermined. You are then given a number that in many cases, takes precedent over your name. If your name is used at all it is your last name. In every way your identity has been reframed from the moment you were arrested. So who are you now?

Perhaps you know sign language, maybe you were an educator. Maybe you were a carpenter and a business owner. These are transferable skills, important understandings that can be tapped as to facilitate a process of growth in an environment where otherwise idleness and boredom too often devolve into negative behaviors. If upon screening an individual's assessment addressed the assets and willingness of the individual to focus on these aspects of the person's unique gifts and talents – perhaps a more proactive experience could be developed as a way of fostering an initiative toward preparing incarcerated individuals for reintegrating back into society with learned skills and a more positive sense of self-worth.

I personally feel so strongly about this approach because it is my experience to have witnessed the benefit of peer driven programs and am convinced of the profound difference such person to person service work can have on an individual.

It has been my good fortune to have the opportunity to participate in the Second Chance Pell Grant Program, which is a program to provide individuals with funding to take college courses while incarcerated. Of course there are numerous factors that must be considered and many rules that must be adhered to- but it is a program being piloted across the country at this time. When I began my course work via the Second Chance Pell Grant I was thirty-nine years old. It had been twenty years since I had been expelled from my first university experience on account of my first conviction for a crime. The full circle nature of my opportunity did not escape me and I committed myself to the work ahead of me. One of the main factors for my having gotten involved with the program was on account of encouragement from other men who were a part of the program suggesting that I submit an application. Due to their support and the support of educational staff, I applied and was chosen to be admitted into the program.

It has been just shy of two years since I began my degree path and I have one course requirement remaining before I am to earn my Associates Degree in Liberal Arts. I presently have a 3.79 GPA and am orienting my future around the possibility of working in the Human Service Field. This would have never occurred to me if it would not have been for the encouragement of my fellows. In supporting me I was able to apply myself to a course of study where I was able to excel. In doing so I developed a more positive sense of self-worth, one which afforded me the courage and wherewithal to share my good fortunes with others. I began tutoring other students and helping out the education staff. I found purpose and meaning in my days, meeting my peers and professors with humility and gratitude for the opportunity at hand. The most rewarding realization came when my professors interacted with me as my equals. It was at this point that I was able to recognize the transformation I had undergone.

As I pursued my college degree I got involved in a Yoga Teacher Training Course offered at the facility where I was incarcerated. This in many ways was a life-long interest of mine and was thrilled to take part in the experience. Yet I am able to look back and answer myself honestly as to whether I would have had the confidence to sign up if it wouldn't have been for the upliftment of spirit I experienced in the College Program, probably not. Nor would I have volunteered to teach classes and facilitate meditation and Tai Chi classes. In these moments I was given the unique gift of working with the hearts and minds of my fellows, in a place where it is common to hold oneself close, not allowing yourself to become vulnerable, but instead I was present for many breakthroughs and instances of revelation. Never in my life would I have experienced such an eye opening picture of humanity self-reflecting.

In addition to this, I found myself being attended to by the Hospice workers and although I knew each one of the men doing service, I saw another side of them, a deeper, more empathetic side of their personhood. On account of this experience I was moved to volunteer for Personal Support Specialist Certification, as to work with the ill and elderly, especially at end of life. Through this training I received an education ranging from the art of being present to establishing boundaries and care techniques for persons with disabilities. Such service work was never even a thought before I began the journey of pursuing anew my college degree. Because I took one step forward onto a path of education my self-esteem and personal self-image grew into a sense of responsibility and a certain amount of accountability to my fellow man and the whole of humanity for being a part of society and a citizen of the world.

The most impactful experience of all was having the opportunity to facilitate the Psychology of Incarceration Program created by Kahil Osirus, a formerly incarcerated individual. In premise it is based on a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy approach which addresses one's thinking and perception of things. In the two years that I led this program, I passed through over 250 men, witnessing the powerful effect of being empowered and shown that in essence: If you thought your way into prison, it seems you ought to be able to think your way out of prison. I added the idea that you could live by two different sets of **ABC's**, either **A-Actions + B-Behaviors = C- Consequences**, or **A-Actions + B-Behaviors = C- Choices**. The difference being whether or not you *reacted* to situations and circumstances or if you *responded* to situations and circumstances. Something so simple had a considerable impact on the lives of the men I had the honor and pleasure of sharing in the journey of self-discovery. In hindsight, I see myself as the one who benefited most from my involvement in this work, although I was often thanked and sought out for advice on matters in the fella's lives. It was the fact that I was given the space to hone my teaching skills and develop my speaking voice, craft my teaching style and manage a group of individuals while presenting material and keeping it interesting. I remember a class where I admitted to the men that all my life I had wanted to do exactly what it was I was doing but couldn't do it until I came to prison. The reason being that I wasn't able to get out of my own way long enough to care about another individual. It was because of these experiences that I have grown into the service oriented man of compassion that I am today.

I share these experiences because it was my privilege to observe how effective a personal interaction can be, especially within environs such as those characterized on television, places of violence and disregard for individual well-being, a place void of love, an unsafe place where one can't help but feel

as though they are a stranger. What must it be like to enter into a cold, dark, steel barred world where everyone is at their lowest point in their lives? It is a place of desperation and helplessness. An unfortunate way of protecting oneself from such vulnerability is to embody the stereotypical dramatizations we too often see in the media of the hard edged, musclebound, dangerous looking convict. But how does such a transition effect the individual? Can they just turn off the "bad dude" persona? What sort of person will be released back into society when all is said and done? There are facilities here in America where those who enter do not exit except for a body bag. This is a truth many Americans are not conscious of, but can actively protect and safeguard against by focusing on a more humane approach to corrections.

This approach begins with understanding that every human being is worthwhile and deserving of respect. There is no reason to degrade anyone further when they have, in many cases, found themselves at their lowest low, that of being in prison. It is not the responsibility of the Correctional Staff to punish those serving time. The sentence is the punishment. Perhaps if the premise was changed to one of rehabilitation and a focus was directed toward a strength-based perspective where an individual's interests and life experiences were taken into consideration in an effort to embolden a convicted person's spirit with the goal of encouraging them to overcome the odds and not return to whatever behavior led them to be incarcerated. What if men and women were given the opportunity to share their specific niche knowledge with those with whom they were incarcerated with? Would persons without skills benefit from learning new skills? What might be accomplished if the skills of each and every incarcerated person was to be drawn upon? In America today there are more than 2 million men, women, and juveniles behind bars. How many of these people have something to offer the world? All of them. Every one of those people are worthwhile and deserving of the opportunity to share with the world what they have secretly lying dormant within them just waiting to be coaxed and teased out of them.

Peer to Peer Mentorship is a ways and means of accomplishing this process by supporting the gifts and talents of incarcerated persons in an effort to afford an environment of openness and relationships of admiration and respect. This is the antithesis of what currently occurs in the justice system where an Us against Them attitude is fostered and perpetuated to every ones detriment. It does not serve society to marginalize and subject our own citizens to a rigorous stripping away of personhood. I think of Mike Tyson and how in his biography he relates how his first manager implanted a sense of invincibility in him, of greatness. This won him the Heavyweight title at a young age. But then when Tyson went to prison, was stripped naked and given a number, the dehumanizing effect paralyzed him. Just as it paralyzes most of the unfortunate folks who have had the experience of serving time. Instead an approach of elevating the already broken spirit to that of a higher ground, a moral ground upon which they stand firm in society as a citizen, repentant of wrongs committed, but not shamed into believing that they are in some way bad. There is a difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is knowing that you did something wrong and am sorry for it. Shame is believing that you are bad and there is something wrong with you as a person that can't be fixed. With a little time and attention almost anything can be fixed.

How might an initiative look like that sponsored a sanctioned Peer to Peer approach? First I think the general attitude toward incarceration and the criminal justice system would have to be revamped to a more informed picture of how statistically America is the most incarcerated nation and the question must be asked as to why that is? Honestly, I alone cannot make this policy change, but in my own way, within my own sphere of influence I can do my part and that is the answer to the conundrum. If individuals who are incarcerated were encouraged to do their part, whether it is using the sign language you know to help translate and convey a deaf person's needs to an officer or if it is teaching someone how to create a monthly budget as to manage their monthly disability check because you were an accountant. Whatever need might be present and allowing for that need to be met by the energy and effort of the people with the answers. There are so many unanswered questions and such a shortage of staff that more often than not matters are ignored until they either cannot be ignored any longer or they are forgotten. In either of these cases a disservice is being done, not only to the individual in need but also to society. Wouldn't be

simpler to authorize those who are willing to give of themselves to do so in whatever capacity they may be able?

There are reform bills and progressive legislation to address some of the more entrenched aspects of our criminal justice system while matters such as how an incarcerated person spends the twenty-four hours of their day- whether it is idly sitting locked in a cell or if it is doing community service work? I believe there is a majority of persons who would voluntarily give their time and energy to be productive, if not only for a sense of feeling good about themselves but that of being tired enough to just get a full night's sleep. What if such persons were allotted a wage? A job is getting done. Are we not citizens, where does it say we cannot be paid a fair wage for our work? Even so, the issue at hand is really a matter of taking advantage of available resources and not doing so in an exploitive way. There are instances where there are programs where incarcerated persons are paid for their work and there are instances where that work is not compensated in a fair and honorable way. One situation off the top of my head is the California fire fighters who get paid a dollar a day, in turn saving the State of California millions. This is not right but it does show the initiative of incarcerated people. Those men and women are not doing the job because of the money, putting their lives on the line for nothing more than the sense of giving back and doing the right thing. That has everything to do with dignity and that is what Peer to Peer service cultivates and nurtures in those who partake of the experience of helping their fellows.

We as a Nation cannot ignore the disparity between the rich and the poor, the free and incarcerated, the have's and have not's. There is no difference to those of us who have realized that what we do to another we do to ourselves. We are ultimately in this together and the sooner we realize this and extend our hand to the person closest to us than that hand to lift us will be extended to us, making a chain of being that has safeguarded our species for thousands of years. It is my belief that we can change the current system by getting involved, tapping the resources that we have available to us and activating the age old premise of social capital and human investment theory. By supporting our fellow human beings we are better human beings while making better human beings. There is no question as to how this idea could exponentially impact the current criminal justice system by starting at the root, that of the people who are serving the time. Give each incarcerated person an outlet to express their best self and I would give my promise that our Nation would not regret it. The results would speak for themselves.

In conclusion, I would like to inspire anyone who read this and found themselves wondering how such an initiative would look- volunteer, speak up and out, go to your local selectmen or congressperson. Do your part, give what you can and while you're at it, let us do our part, and let us give what we have to give. The world needs every little bit of love it can get, and this is a way to bring love back into the lives of incarcerated persons everywhere by allowing them to work with their fellows and to experience the joy of seeing someone who is struggling be sated just by a little patience and show of compassion.