

Psychological Survival

Introduction:

Hello! To whoever the reader is my name is Jerome A. Beale. Briefly, I would like to share with you what my life was like prior to becoming incarcerated. But the primary goal is to try to give you a picture of what my incarceration experience has been like throughout the duration of twenty years. Later, I will discuss what I mean by the title of this narrative essay, "psychological survival". Before I came to prison, I lived the typical life most law abiding U.S. citizens would live. Work, marry, and family was my sole premise. In October of 1995, I chose to get married at the age of 21. I wanted to do the right thing especially with my wife being six months pregnant with my son. At such a young age, I didn't fully understand myself as a person. At any rate, I left Norfolk State University after completing two years to enter the United States Army at the displeasure of my mother. Income and taking care of my wife and son was a top priority. After basic training, I had orders to be stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington. So I moved my wife and son with me to Tacoma, Washington. Living on our own was financially difficult despite outside help from family members. Enlisted pay simply was not enough. My wife and I agreed that she and my son would return to Virginia and live with her father. She would work and save money. On the other hand, I moved from

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our apartment in Tacoma, Washington to the barracks located on Fort Lewis Base. This gave me the opportunity to save money and catch up on unpaid debts. During this time apart, I went back to college and acquired an associate's degree in Arts & Sciences from Pierce Community College. I later applied for officer school within the U.S. Army called Green to Gold. This program was designed to assist enlisted ~~soldier~~ soldiers who aspired to become Army officers. After receiving my letter of intent, I was accepted at Old Dominion University's ROTC program. Upon arriving back home in Portsmouth, Virginia, I started my civil engineering courses and found employment at Newport News Shipbuilding. Unfortunately, I discovered infidelity within my marriage after contracting a sexual transmitted disease. Ultimately, this was the catalyst that led to the impetus of me breaking the law. I was convicted of aggravated malicious wounding and statutory burglary. Thankfully, my wife survived despite being severely beaten. This is disheartening to discuss even to this day but an event that reveals why I am in prison to the current moment. Never would I have imagined getting married in a church in 1995 would one day transpire into a lengthy prison sentence.

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For me leaving society and entering the prison atmosphere,

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was a major adjustment. I was filled with fear and the only images I had of prison was the images from movies and the media. It was gut wrenching. Even though human beings possess the ability to adjust to almost anything, adjustment for me was quite a tremendous challenge. I have never been the type to try and fit in with people who I feel does not have my interest at heart especially those who are diametrically opposed to my core beliefs of education and self-reflection. Prison life will test your mental capacity to the fullest. After spending almost a generation in prison - twenty years - I've seen an ugly side of human nature. By no means does prison have a monopoly on humanity's worst, Darkness and evil may be found in any setting. One could easily testify to the wicked atrocities that take place in free society. What I believe that differentiates prison from free society is close proximity. For example, in prison you are simply stuck and embedded in a culture of useless chatter, incessant noise, pervasive ignorance, low-self esteem, extreme violence, drug usage, direct racism, etc. Free society at least offers an option for the person to perhaps change jobs, move to another location, or simply just get away. Free society offers numerous escapes. Prison there are no escapes and if ~~they~~^{there} are they are momentary or fleeting. Once I entered this environment I realized how mentally taxing

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taxing prison life could be. It was like I was in a different world. Because of how my parents raised me, I noticed the values and morals instilled in me was in direct conflict with prison culture. My inherited way of living was not transferrable to the animal kingdom. Prison culture is built on hostility and dishonesty. Positive virtues are viewed as weakness and signs of inferiority. I would sometimes hear inmates say, "oh, that guy, comes from a good family". Do to the fact that the individual is courteous and respectful and doesn't run wild. Even this perception will be perverted into thinking into predatory terms, I can gain advantage over that well-mannered individual. He doesn't understand the streets. My mind was constantly under attack in this new milieu. Prison dynamics or unforeseen forces will unconsciously shape your psyche to disregard sympathy and care for humanity, if not a vigilant undertaking of guarding your mind. This new atmosphere of prison life presented me with a dilemma. Do I accept this new barbaric behavior that is callous in regards to mankind? Or, do I practice the home conditioning taught by my parents? This psychological warfare plays out everything an inmate will encounter in prison. Choosing the later question was easy for me. Coming to prison at the age of 27 gave me a slight advantage in comparison to person coming to prison at the age of 17 or 18. To some degree,

I didn't have many insecurities and peer pressure (5) working against me. Yes, I had some form of structure even though it was fragile. The younger guys coming to prison today battle big time pertaining to peer pressure. Acceptance within gang culture has greatly increased. Throughout my twenty years of incarceration, fifteen of them I have served in the capacity of being a teacher's aide. Peer pressure plays a large role in self identity. For example, while tutoring this student, I saw how his self-identity was not firmly established and he turned out into an emotional outburst against me. I handed him an assignment to complete. After he completed it, he gave it back to me for me to check his answers under his watchful eye I might say. As I began to put the letter X by the wrong answers, he became infuriated at me yelling, "I just want to mark his paper wrong anyway." At first I thought the student was mentally disturbed so I kept my composure. Quickly, I negotiated with him that I would give him another assignment and when I check it again the answers that I see are wrong I will leave them unmark and give you the opportunity to go back and change them. His whole countenance change into elation. This student was so worried about his performance as a measuring stick for his self identity that he felt threaten to the point of going to physical combat against me.

Prison life if not watchful will wither away the (6.) mental stability of its inhabitants. Without the presence of qualified counselors and mental health professionals, the problem only worsen. To be honest, I see no effort to change this issue within the Virginia Department of Corrections. Prison is becoming worse. There is no outlet for psychological improvement. Everyday is a battle to maintain mental sanity. Constantly, I find myself fighting against my own insecurities and the insecurities of others. Not to mention the stereotypes of being a felon and inhuman. All of these things are burdensome. Earlier I named this brief essay "psychological survival" due to the inmate's entry into the prison landscape on the basis that prisons are not laboratory in seeking rehabilitation that's authentic but are in the business of profits and warehousing. Warehousing is an intrinsic principle of modern day prisons today. I discovered in order to acquire mental stability that I must take full responsibility of continuously educating myself on all disciplines that life has to offer. I must stay abreast to an ever changing complex society. Become my own dietitian, workout trainer, doctor, advocate, therapist etc. If I expect to survive this nightmare, I strive to become flexible and knowledgeable. Prison culture views people like myself as numbers rather than humans. Everyday is a battle for psychological survival. I find I have to navigate around toxic individuals and in some cases,

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even think for them and for myself. The level of mental energy one must have or what's required to keep a strong mind must not be underestimated. I try to get the appropriate rest and vital quiet reading time to stay mentally fit on a daily basis. Time management and developing discipline are essential tools in fending off the intrusion of prison forces. This has always been my methodology of mental survival, but even still this practice oftentimes will bring you into conflict with other inmates who have no semblance of structure or purpose in life. Appearing to be different brings unwanted attention. Another point of contention I have when it comes to mental or psychological survival in prison is the continuous high turnover rate with prisoners going home and new prisoners coming in. You never really have the chance to become adjusted to core individuals. Constantly, you are adjusting and readjusting to new cellmates. When I encounter a new cellmate, thoughts run through my mind in the form of questions. Does this person has mental health issues? Is this person gang affiliated? Does he have constructive things to do to keep him occupied? Does he has a support system or will he be bumming resources from me? Imagine this process repeating itself over and over again. At some point mental fatigue sets in, and the next thought that enters my mind is, "when will this nightmare end, I am ready to go home". My aim

is to leave prison with my mind intact and un- (8.)
contaminated by the indoctrination of prison culture.
I found myself resorting to a strategy of appeasing
the ignorance of inmates simply to have free time
for myself to accomplish personal needs. The tragic
events of police brutality against black men and political
rhetoric of white supremacists has an indirect effect
on how security staff at prison institutions treat inmates.
Many of them take out their frustration on us. I witnessed
a white security officer verbally accost a young black
inmate about not having his mask on ^{during the pandemic} in the aftermath
of the presidential election between ~~the pandemic~~ Biden and Trump.
The black young man was surrounded instantly by
five other white security officers. The provoking white
officer declared, "I've been in this business for over twenty
years and I don't give a shit about people like you."
In other words, I don't care nothing about black
people. Events such as these accumulated throughout
my 20 year span of incarceration. Some of these episodes
bring back raw emotion that would enable me to possibly
write for days. However this was not my agenda.
My purpose for writing was simply to convey to the
reader the multitudes of factors that may contribute to
the deterioration of an inmate mind. Consider these
factors: Small windows not permitting much light,
Dull colors of prison walls creating depression,

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Unruly and aggressive guards. Boredom and no purpose. Lack of intense rehabilitative decompression programs for mental health. Lack of technological educational needs. Poor nutrition and bad physical health. Aversion towards education amongst inmates with lengthy prison sentences. Predatory environment. No family support system. No jobs. My situation was somewhat bearable because of my education and family support system. Life in prison is difficult for anybody whether you are educated or uneducated. Whether you have a support system or not. Mentally, it is still taxing. The burden I carry is knowing the unforeseen ^{forces I} ~~to~~ must overcome that associated with prison by fighting to keep a strong mind in a distressing situation and managing those around me who are clueless to what's happening to them. I can easily assure that prison life is not for the faint of heart by any stretch of the imagination. The goal is to ^{stay} ever vigilant and improve one's mental state. Once the mind becomes unhealthy anything negative is subject to occur within prison. The key to survival in prison is to protect the mind at all cost. I and others must perpetually nurture and cultivate it. Resting on one's laurel is not an option nor taking a day off. Survival is predicated on protection of the mind and essential in reuniting with love ones.