

The Learning Experience

By Julian Bak

I have said in the past that prison changes you no matter what. You have the power, however, to decide how, but only if you are consciously aware of it. I recently came across a journal that I started nearly five years ago when I first arrived at prison and was amused by my own naivete. Having had the good fortune of being allowed to do my pre-trial time in a halfway house, I was able to observe many different kinds of men who were just coming out of prison. From them, I learned about prison politics, what kinds of prison jobs are available, and what kinds of programs there are in prison. But most of all, I learned what I did not want to become once I left prison. I saw so many men who were jaded, immature, foul-mouthed, and had really bad attitudes. I made a conscious decision back then that I would not allow prison to change me for the worse. As I reflected back on my time in the halfway house and the learning experience that it was, I couldn't help but think about the many other things I've learned since then during my time within these walls.

Since coming to prison, I have immersed myself in all classes, treatment and recovery programs, and every bit of volunteering that I possibly can. I didn't do it all just to stay busy, though that has been a huge benefit, as my time has really flown by. I did it to learn as much as I possibly can while I have the time so that I won't repeat past mistakes and come back to prison. This was another thing I observed in the halfway house: I saw several men who couldn't keep their act together. They either violated their probation one way or another or caught new charges to end up back in prison. I never want that to be me.

All of the constructive things I stay busy with benefit me greatly. I have learned a great deal about how to recognize my own thinking errors, how to tolerate discomfort, and how to help other people in various ways. Two of the biggest things I've learned have been in my recovery from alcohol dependency. First, I learned that all my problems were of my own making, and second, I learned that I am able to help myself when I choose to. Six years of sobriety and recovery work can provide a lot of clarity. These have not only been very important and tough life lessons about my past, but I know I will carry them forward for the rest of my days. They will serve me well, and, indeed, they already have.

As I look around at my fellow inmates, I see many examples of how not to think and behave. Thankfully, my goal of not changing for the worse has never wavered. With only about one year left to serve, I am confident that I will leave here having accomplished that goal. My positive outlook and good attitude remain intact after six years in the criminal justice system. Thanks to recent educational opportunities afforded to me by my prison jobs, my drive to continue bettering myself beyond these walls is stronger than ever. Prison has been one long and persistent lesson in patience and perseverance. If I can get through this, then I can finish college, I can wait for tough times to pass and get better, and I can survive life's disappointments on my way to bigger and much better things.

None of this is to say that I went through the absolute worst thing ever, or that I had things way harder than anyone else. I didn't. I'd also be remiss if I didn't mention the horrors my victims suffered at the hands of their abusers and by people like me who downloaded the images and videos of their abuse. Who were my victims you might ask? My victims were every single child in every single picture and video I ever looked at. It doesn't matter to me that I wasn't the one who took the pictures or that I wasn't the one who touched them. My crime of possessing and distributing child sex abuse images does not make me any less culpable than the people who took the pictures and did the touching and raping. There is no excuse for my behavior and I wholeheartedly believe that I deserved to come to prison. Child pornography is illegal for very good reasons and I will always be ashamed and embarrassed that I helped perpetuate the exploitation of innocent children. I believe losing my freedom for nine years has been a very fair punishment. It might even border on too lenient but that is my opinion. Plenty of people think it isn't nearly long enough. In any case, it has given me time to get my head on straight so that I can leave here a much better person; one who knows how to handle my problems constructively, without doing anything to break the law and hurt people or hurt myself.

I've learned a lot about human nature while incarcerated. You can't cram a thousand people together in a very confined space without personalities clashing and egos colliding. Especially when you consider that in so many ways, these people are all immature on one level or another, myself included. We would have to be, in order to make the mistakes that we have. Sadly, I've learned that a lot of men in here never grew past a certain age psychologically and emotionally. Take the mentality of an 11 or 12-year-old boy and put it in a grown man's body. Then, imagine a thousand of these mentally stunted men all living together in very close quarters and you'll have a rough idea of what it's like in here. I'm exaggerating of course because not everyone is really that childish, thank goodness, but enough are to get on my nerves once in a while.

After years of incarceration, I've also learned a lot about what not to do if I don't want to end up back here once I get out. Far be it from me to harshly judge anyone for making mistakes, but the knuckle-heads who keep making the same mistakes over and over leave me scratching my head. First, and most importantly, I have learned that one should never lie to their probation officer. In my observation, lies, half-truths, hiding things, and all other manners of deception are quick ways back to federal prison. Also, pornography, secret cell phones, and not being able to stay sober are other quick ways back as well. These are the most common reasons that I see why guys come back to prison. I've learned that I need to always be truthful, know the rules so I can follow them, and if I mess up, own it and fess up right away so that I can correct it and move on.

Perhaps the biggest thing I've learned while being incarcerated though is what the word freedom really means to me. It's more than just not being in a cage. It's more than just getting to do what I want when I want or having no one to answer to. It's really about being at peace with myself and comfortable in my own skin. It's about being joyous, happy, and free from the need to drink or do anything destructive or illegal. God knows I spent much longer in the torturous prison that is alcoholism than I will ever spend in actual prison. Freedom is about sleeping peacefully at night knowing that I am no longer

hurting people; that I'm doing everything in my power to make amends for what I did wrong; and that I'm doing all I can to better myself in every way possible. True freedom, like true happiness, comes from within. It isn't something one can be handed or that can be bought. It is something that is made in the heart, mind, and soul. These lessons have left indelible prints on my life; prints that I will always be able to reflect on and draw from whenever I need to.

I will forever be grateful for this learning experience.