

## IT IS WHAT IT IS

By Leo Cardez

As a new fish I walked in to the inmate counselor's office and was immediately drawn to the huge sign on the wall: Don't Expect What's Perfect -- Expect What's Reasonable. Counselor Gray (not his real name) was in his late 30s wearing khakis and a Cubs T-shirt -- he had the beleaguered look of well...a prison counselor. "What do you want?" he asked without bothering to look up from his files. I took a deep breath and started in on how my funds had not been transferred from NRC (an inmate processing station) and I needed... "Funds can take 4-8 weeks to follow you here," he interrupted. I continued to plead my case. He interrupted me again, "It is what it is," he told me flatly. I am not a violent person by nature, contrary to what you may believe about most inmates, but in that moment it took a super human effort not to jump across that desk and throttle him like Homer would Bart. It took many years and a plethora of similar experiences to realize he was right, sometimes, it IS what it is. And, the sooner I learned that lesson the sooner I could get on with my new life in this dismal crypt.

We all know shit happens. Life is unfair, maybe even more so for us wasting away in gray bar human warehouses. We could spend our days complaining about all the injustices we endure...and we'd be justified, but what would that really accomplish? When has merely complaining about something ever changed anything? The only thing we accomplish is driving ourselves nuts with despair, like being stuck in a barrel at the bottom of the ocean with no options. There is nothing worse. So what DO we do?

Men's Health magazine advisor, Gregory Scott Brown, MD, psychiatrist, and founder of Center for Green Psychiatry recommends instead: Radical Acceptance. Put bluntly, accepting that it is what it is. Now, that doesn't mean we ignore the problem, nor are we agreeing it's okay to keep things the way they are. It's the opposite really. It's about gaining control over our circumstances by accepting that which we cannot change versus continually losing the same battles. Those of us working "the steps" (e.g. AA) recognize the strategic approach. The Serenity prayer that bookends

AA meetings starts with, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change..." It seems they may be onto something.



My young daughter dropped out of my life after my arrest and conviction. I desperately tried to re-connect with her via a flurry of apology and explanation letters. I never received a response. Then, one day, I received a returned envelope: Wrong Address. Her and her mother had moved. Where? I had no way of knowing or finding out. For awhile I pleaded with friends and family to reach out to her via social media...crickets. Finally, after 5 heart-wrenching years, I accepted she wanted nothing to do with me and worse, there was nothing I could do about it.

It's hard because our tendency is to believe that if we try hard enough for long enough we can accomplish almost anything -- it's what Hollywood has been peddling for years. Remember Rudy, with his dream of playing Notre Dame football? Or Forrest finally getting "his Jenny?"

But, in the real world I had to stop torturing myself; I had to accept reality. Only then could I move on and possibly see the problem in a new light and, hopefully, find another solution. Brown agrees, "It's extreme, but effective. Making peace with reality keeps your emotions from taking over and allows you to think rationally."

Brown further explains, "Focusing on your end goal can help you do this -- especially if you want to change a situation." Thinking long-term (in my case 10 years) helps one think creatively and develop new strategies. And that's exactly what I did.

First, I accepted my letters weren't working. Period. I stopped wasting my time and money on letters. Next, I accepted that it was very likely that she hated me or worse, was indifferent. This was the hardest part to accept. It tore me apart. I grieved her loss for months and I am not ashamed to admit I cried for the first time in 25 years. Over time I began to see the problem in a new way. An idea began to percolate: An idea that would change my life forever. On its face it is simple and straightforward: I cannot control when or if she will ever want to re-connect, but I can make sure I am the best possible version of myself in the chance that she ever does.

Now, I live my life with this purpose squarely in my sights. I work in my prison's Quarantine/Isolation building and invest my earnings in blue



chip stocks. My goal is to have an emergency nest egg in the event she ever needs financial help or at the very least be able to leave something behind for her. I've completed a slew of Bible, Educational and Fatherhood classes while incarcerated in the hopes of becoming a kinder, wiser person. I teach Yoga to special needs inmates and help Latino inmates translate documents with the purpose of staying humble and building a stronger character. I write articles to help my shadow community and plan to finish a hybrid self-help/memoir, before my release, titled: Do Your Time, Don't Let Your Time Do You. Everything I do is geared toward becoming the best version of myself...for her. So that she may be able to see me as more than my worst mistake and hear me past her own anger. I admit the odds are against me, but there's a chance. All I need is a chance.

The catalyst to my new outlook was the radical acceptance Professor Brown promoted. I couldn't half-ass it, I had to go all-in. It was only by completely accepting my situation that I could begin to focus on what I could do. What I could control. The beauty is that by losing I won a newfound hope and purpose- no small feat in this otherwise dreary existence. I had found an escape hatch from my barrel.

The reality is, this isn't the first time I've practiced radical acceptance. In fact, most of us will one day be forced either by circumstances or choice to accept our situation. I remember when I first arrived to prison as a fit, healthy, active 30 year old I would play pick-up basketball during our gym periods. Our gym had two courts, one was for the "A" teams. The good, competitive players (there was even an ex-pro playing at one time). The other side were the "B" teams. They were past their prime, but still enjoyed a good game of ball. For years my ego demanded I play on the A side...even though my body was taking a beating and recovering was taking longer than ever. Eventually, a serious leg injury landed me at the hospital with a nurse reviewing my x-rays, cocking an eyebrow and telling me it may be time to put up my Nike's. It was hard to hear, but she was right. After my recovery, I returned to the gym and began playing on the B side. I found I enjoyed it more and was still able to get a good sweat in and it quenched my competitive thirst (Bonus: I won alot more too.) without the black eyes and sprained muscles. See, the humiliating pain of not being able to play on the A side wasn't all bad. Pain can teach us about life and ourselves. Freedom and beauty can often be found through pain...if we can just learn to accept them.



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