

CHAPTER 10: ASPIRE TO BECOME SOMETHING MORE

After a person defines success, sets goals, and develops the right attitude, he must take the next step. He must not allow current circumstances, his predicament, or his environment to define the limits of his life. Instead, he should aspire to become something more.

Our aspirations can help us see the future. That vision can be especially powerful for a person living in difficult circumstances, including a prison cell.

Ask me how I know.

When a person goes through the humiliating and degrading process that accompanies criminal charges, a series of consequences follow. In my case, those consequences included conviction, confinement, stigma, and a lengthy prison term. Once inside, I had to pass through routines that extinguish hope and weaken ambition.

If a person doesn't look to the future, he may focus on getting through the day, enduring the sentence, or avoiding the immediate pain that comes with separation from family and community. When a person gives up hope of building a better future, a parade of horrors usually follows. On the other hand, if a person aspires to more, he develops the strength necessary to commit to continuous preparation.

In the context of the Straight-A Guide, aspiration is not fantasy. It is not "happy talk" about what we are going to do in the future. It is not the habit of wishing for a better life without preparing for one. An aspiration should lead to disciplined actions. Envision a better future and commit to all that you must do to build and build. Do not allow the obstacles and negativity of prison to blow you off course or send you in the wrong direction, away from the results you want.

Solitary Forced Me to Think Beyond the Cell

During the first year I spent in solitary confinement, I found hope in reading the Bible. Passages such as Micah 6:8 taught me that I could build a better life if I chose to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. That message helped me focus on more than the 45-year sentence. Instead, I could think about how the

decisions I made each day would influence the life I would lead on the other side of the prison journey.

I began reflecting on Socratic questions:

- » What lessons can I learn from the experience ahead of me?
- » What could I become if I used the years ahead deliberately?
- » How could the lessons I learned serve others?
- » How could I leave prison stronger, wiser, and more useful than when I entered?

Those kinds of questions lead to other questions. By reflecting on such questions, we can develop realistic aspirations. We begin to understand the future we want to build. No one can change the past. But the decisions we make every day determine whether our aspirations become reality or remain only something we talk about.

Without aspiration, prison can reduce life to routine and survival. To restore confidence, a person must imagine the life he wants to lead and then start reverse engineering the steps he can take to make himself a more likely candidate for success. Aspiration helped me imagine a life of contribution, service, and meaning. I could begin believing that the years ahead, though painful, did not have to be empty. Instead, they could become a pathway to acquire knowledge and build credentials that would lead to the result I wanted. Aspiration, together with disciplined effort, helped me restore confidence during that first year I spent in solitary. Anyone can do the same.

ASPIRATION IS NOT FANTASY

Some people hear words like aspiration, vision, or purpose and assume they belong to the world of slogans. They think aspiration means dreaming without discipline or talking about a future, without taking any intentional actions that lead to results. For the purpose of this course, please differentiate aspiration from fantasy. Aspiration becomes real when it strengthens present commitment. If it does not lead to better decisions, then it is only talk, or a fantasy about what a person dreams of experiencing. If a person aspires to something more, he should begin asking:

- » What would that future require of me?
- » What skills would I need?
- » What sacrifices would I have to make?
- » What habits would have to change?
- » What record would I need to build to support that future?

Aspiration makes present hardship more bearable and the efforts a person makes more meaningful. Obstacles and resistance will remain, because they are part of prison. Yet aspiration can give a person the strength to keep moving forward.

A person who fantasizes becomes discouraged easily. He makes excuses, complains about what the system is not doing, or focuses on what is unavailable. A person who aspires with discipline begins turning vision into preparation.

Frederick Douglass and the Aspiration to Build Solutions

When I read about Frederick Douglass, I admired that he aspired to something larger than his own comfort. After escaping from slavery, he aspired to become the kind of man who could influence others, expose injustice, and help build a different future for people who suffered under oppression. To do that, he had to prepare himself first.

- » He had to learn how to read.
- » He had to learn how to write.
- » He had to learn how to communicate.
- » He had to develop himself before he could effectively contribute to something larger than his own immediate survival.

That lesson inspired me to work in ways that would help me emulate what I learned from him. I wanted to use the years ahead in a way that might eventually improve outcomes for people in prison and for people facing long-term confinement. I could not convert that aspiration into reality without preparing. My aspiration helped me recognize the small steps I would have to take, such as reading books about leadership, influence, and strategy, then working toward academic credentials. I would have to document everything, plan carefully, and develop a record of unimpeachable resources showing the work along the way.

Douglass helped me accept that if I aspired to something more than my current circumstances, I would have to organize my life and live productively, regardless of the obstacles I faced.

THE BRICKLAYERS

In Changpeng Zhao's memoir, *Freedom of Money*, I read a story about three bricklayers that explain the importance of aspiration.

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A passerby asks the first bricklayer, “What are you doing?”

He answers, “I’m laying bricks.”

He asks the second, “What are you doing?”

The second replies, “I’m building a wall.”

Then he asks the third, “What are you doing?”

The third man says, “I’m building a cathedral.”

All three men are doing the same physical task. The difference is not in the labor. The difference is in the vision.

The first sees only the task. The second sees the structure. The third sees the purpose. That story captures the importance of aspiration. It changes the meaning of present effort by connecting it to something larger than the moment.

Aspiration can become a foundational tool for building a new future, one that brings a person out of darkness and into a life of meaning, relevance, contribution, and even prosperity. Use a profile to develop that story, knowing that each entry can bring a person closer to the next opportunity. Vision should lead to work, and that work is essential for building a future. The labor may not be easy, but it becomes meaningful when aspiration is present. I want people in prison, including those in solitary, to understand that what they are doing today can belong to something larger than the pain of today.

Builders Prepare Before Results Appear

Leaders from very different worlds taught me that builders always prepare before results appear.

Bill Gates imagined a future in which every home and every business would use computers long before that vision became reality. To move toward that aspiration, he had to prepare, build, and think in terms of systems, teams, and daily progress.

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In reading about Steve Jobs, I remember a phrase associated with him that inspired me: good artists copy ideas, great artists steal ideas. Since I was in prison, I stole ideas from great leaders, and they taught me the importance of aspiring to something more than the struggles I lived with at the start of my journey. That vision gave me strength, and I believe others can build strength if they aspire to the next chapter of their lives.

The Straight-A Guide comes from ideas I stole from leaders. They taught me how to think differently, and I applied their lessons to the conditions I faced. Jobs helped me see that builders study what works, take the best lessons they can find, and then apply them with discipline and intention.

More recently, I learned from the innovator known as Satoshi Nakamoto. He aspired to introduce a new form of currency during a time of financial crisis and distrust in existing systems. To turn his aspiration into reality, he wrote a white paper that introduced the world to bitcoin. Satoshi's story, like CZ's story, is a story of building.

Their stories share a common theme: aspiration requires more than dissatisfaction with the present. It requires methodical steps that move from concept to reality.

I study builders because they think beyond immediate limitations. They do not stop with wishing or fantasy. They prepare, and they become the change they want to see. If you aspire to something more, ask yourself what preparations are necessary to convert your aspirations into your new reality.

ASPIRATION AND A FUTURE ORIENTATION

For those who do not aspire, imprisonment can lead to apathy, anger, hatred, and despondency. A negative mindset can contribute to intergenerational cycles of failure. Those who aspire, on the other hand, can use their time inside to prepare, and then write the next chapter, a chapter they engineered to position themselves for more opportunities.

Despite the long sentence I served, aspiration helped keep the future alive in my thinking. It reminded me that today's work could lead to a more successful life in the days, months, years, and decades ahead.

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That is one reason aspiration and faith are closely related in my thinking. Faith helped me believe that the years ahead could still carry meaning. Aspiration helped me translate those beliefs into the life I am living now. I finished my prison term on August 12, 2013. Since then, I have been developing this ministry with hopes of helping more people build pathways to earn freedom through merit.

ASPIRATION AND FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

One of the practical conclusions I reached while in prison was that if I wanted to devote my life to serving others, I would need financial independence. I did not want my ability to contribute to depend entirely on whether other people chose to employ me, approve me, or support me. That aspiration influenced many later decisions. It shaped the way I thought about:

- » Reading,
- » Education,
- » Business,
- » Documentation,
- » Opportunity, and
- » Long-term preparation.

Some people hear a word like aspiration and assume it is abstract. I do not see it that way. Aspiration should lead to practical thought. If I aspire to contribute to society, then I must ask:

- » How will I support that work?
- » What economic structure should support my independence?
- » What skills must I build?
- » What relationships must I develop?
- » What record must I create?

Aspiration should stretch the imagination, but it should also sharpen discipline.

ASPIRATIONS AND MEMORIALIZING THE JOURNEY

Just as with success and goals, by writing about our aspirations, we begin to sow seeds that can help us in the future. It is important to establish a timeline. We want to show the influence of today's decisions on the opportunities that open later. By memorializing the journey, we build a record with time stamps that show consistency and intrinsic motivation. That record helps us build arguments that we are valuable because we do not luck our way into success; we engineer it.

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- » A biography can reveal what kind of person you intend to become.
- » Journals can show whether daily conduct aligns with that aspiration.
- » Book reports can show what thinkers and builders are helping shape the vision.
- » A release plan can show how aspiration becomes concrete through strategic decisions.

Without that documentation, people will not know all the work that went into building the life you intend to lead. Ask yourself:

- » Is this aspiration serious?
- » Does my conduct show commitment?
- » Am I building toward it, or only talking about what I'm going to do?

The profile you develop gives people a window into your journey. Your aspirations and your profile should remind you:

- » I am still building toward something.
- » I am not only serving time.
- » I am preparing for a future that should be larger than my current conditions.
- » I do not have to let the walls become the limits of my identity.

In the context of our Straight-A Guide, aspiration leads to discipline, meaning, and sustained action, which we will cover in later chapters. You do not need to map out every detail of the future today. Start by asking:

- » What kind of life would be worthy of the effort I am making now?
- » What kind of person do I want to become?
- » What would contribution look like for me?
- » What future is large enough to justify present discipline?
- » What should I begin building now if I want that future to become more realistic?

Those questions help aspiration move from fantasy into preparation.

SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS

1. What do I aspire to become?
2. What future would be worthy of the effort I am making now?
3. In what ways have my present circumstances limited my imagination?
4. What should I be building if I want that future to become more realistic?
5. What books, leaders, or stories are helping shape my aspiration?
6. What writing would show that my aspiration is serious rather than vague?
7. How can I connect my aspiration to the way I use time right now?

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Aspiration is not an escape from reality. It is a disciplined vision of a better future that gives meaning to present effort and helps a person keep preparing, even while living through difficult conditions.



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