

CHAPTER 5: LESSONS I LEARNED IN SOLITARY

The first year I spent in the criminal justice system was unlike anything I had imagined. Authorities arrested me on August 11, 1987. My case did not involve weapons, violence, or gang activity. Yet Ronald Reagan was in the White House, and we were at the beginning of the War on Drugs. Because prosecutors charged me as a kingpin, jailers in the detention center locked me in solitary confinement.

I was 23 years old. Until that point in my life, I had lived recklessly, with little regard for the long-term consequences of my actions. In solitary, I had time to think, though it took me a while to accept responsibility, even though I knew I was guilty.

The lawyer I hired told me what I wanted to hear rather than what I needed to hear. I knew I was guilty, but I still pushed the government to prove the case to a jury. During the trial, I took the witness stand and perjured myself by testifying that I was innocent. The jury convicted me on every count. Those convictions exposed me to the possibility of a life sentence.

Following my conviction, I began to accept that life had changed. I had lost my liberty, my normal routines, and all my ill-gotten gains. My wife at the time had gone her own way. I lost the illusion that my attorney, or anyone else, could save me from the consequences of decisions I had made. I was left with time, silence, and questions about the future.

That kind of isolation forces a person to think. If I did not learn how to think differently, the prison system would consume me. That first stage of confinement became the place where I began learning some of the most important lessons of my life.

What are you learning from your experience?

In that era, and in that facility, authorities only allowed a person to have a book of faith in the cell. I had a Bible. Still defiant, I spent the first seven or eight months doing pushups, running in place, and reading from Genesis to Revelation. I searched those pages for meaning and for lessons on what I should do next. Sever-

al stories had meaning for me, likely because of the predicament I had created for myself.

- » The story of the Prodigal Son forced me to think about recklessness, separation, humiliation, and return. My grandparents did not want to speak with me anymore, and I hoped that, in time, I could make amends. That story gave me hope that even after making bad decisions, I could begin the difficult work of returning to a better path. It helped me accept that my actions had wounded people who loved me. I wanted to do better.
- » The Parable of the Talents affected me in a different way. It helped me accept that I had an obligation to God and to others. I had used my energy, intelligence, and ambition in destructive ways, and those choices cost me my liberty. To atone, I would have to become a builder and write the next chapter of my life.
- » The story of Joseph also gave me hope. An injustice led to his imprisonment, and yet he did not complain, even though he did not know whether his suffering would end. Still, he used adversity to become stronger, wiser, and more useful.

These stories helped me think differently about responsibility, loss, and the possibility of rebuilding.

ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY

Reading a few Biblical stories did not make me disciplined, patient, and accepting of the changes in my life. But those stories helped me stop living in denial, and they opened my mind to the possibility of change and accepting responsibility.

I accepted that if I wanted to grow, and reach my full potential, I would have to focus on what I could control, regardless of what decisions others made. I'd have to become a good steward of:

1. Time: Even from solitary confinement, I could use time to start crafting a plan that I could use to navigate the decades I expected to serve in prison.
2. Truth: If I genuinely believed that God expected me to develop myself and live with humility, I'd have to work toward that end and build a record that would speak louder than the bad decisions I had made which led me to prison.

3. Relationships: If I wanted to succeed upon release, I'd have to find ways to build a coalition of support, and prove worthy of the trust they placed in me.
4. Resources: Although the criminal charge resulted in the loss of all my ill-gotten gains, I'd have to rebuild resources that would help me transition into society when the time came.

Before my arrest, I failed to assess the magnitude of my crimes or the risks I was taking. The combination of solitary confinement and my conviction stripped away excuses. The steel door, the isolation, and the sentence I faced made it impossible to depend on an attorney, or anyone else, to solve problems that my own decisions had created.

I started accepting responsibility.

I began to understand that I would have to become the person responsible for rebuilding my future. Nobody else could think for me. Nobody else could serve the time for me. Nobody else could write the next chapter of my life. Either I could let my crime and imprisonment define me, or I could start learning how to recalibrate.

That understanding became the foundation for everything that followed.

SOLITARY FORCED ME TO THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE

When a person faces life in prison, the future can feel too overwhelming. I remain grateful to an officer in the detention center, Officer Wilson. Although rules prohibited my family from sending books to me, he had access and discretion. I credit him for helping to change my life, because he brought me books that helped me learn from people who suffered through conditions far worse than mine. For the first time, I began reading about Frederick Douglass, Socrates, Viktor Frankl, Nelson Mandela, and others. Their stories helped me think differently. Instead of asking only, "How will I survive the sentence I receive?" I began asking smaller, more productive questions:

- » What would be the best possible outcome?
- » What steps can I take to influence the people who will influence my life?
- » How can I emerge stronger rather than weaker?
- » What kind of person do I want to become through this experience?

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- » In what ways can I build a pathway to reconcile with society for the crimes I committed?

Those questions forced me to think differently. Instead of dwelling only on the pain I would endure, I began to contemplate a better future. I had been feeling trapped in a dark maze. The discipline of thinking, and of asking Socratic questions, helped me develop a plan. While incarcerated, I would work toward a three-part plan:

1. I would educate myself.
2. I would contribute to society in meaningful, measurable ways.
3. I would build a support network.

I believed that commitment would help me make better decisions about the next week, the next month, and the next season of life. I could read intentionally and develop more skills, including writing, math, and critical thinking. I could document the steps I took to show progress. This plan, I believed, would help open new skills, relationships, and opportunities.

That plan became the compass that carried me through the journey.

While in solitary confinement, I learned a valuable lesson: a person may not be able to control the sentence, but he can begin controlling the response. He can decide whether time will become only punishment or whether it can also become preparation.

SELF-LEADERSHIP

In solitary confinement, I began learning from people who changed the way I think—even though I would never meet them. They helped me understand that if I wanted a different future, I would have to become a good steward of resources, and govern the part of life that remained within my control:

- » my thoughts,
- » my reading,
- » my reactions,
- » my habits,
- » and eventually my plans.

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That did not mean life suddenly became easier. It meant I stopped waiting for lawyers or anyone else to create meaning for me. I stopped assuming that time alone would improve me. I began seeing that progress would require deliberate effort.

Many people enter prison, or even the pretrial stage, expecting that lawyers will solve the problem. They hope some external force will restore life as they once knew it. Some allow others in the system to dictate how they will serve the sentence, forfeiting their ability to engineer a strategy that may lead to better outcomes. Growth begins when a person responds to adversity with more honesty, more structure, and more intention.

SPIRITUAL, MORAL, AND PRACTICAL LESSONS

The first lessons I learned in solitary confinement were not only spiritual. They were also moral and practical.

- » Spiritually, I began understanding that I had wasted gifts. To rebuild, I would need to become a better steward of time. I would have to make decisions that could lead to better opportunities.
- » Morally, I began understanding that I had to stop shifting blame and start owning my decisions.
- » Practically, I began understanding that if the years ahead were going to mean anything, I would need to use them deliberately. I would have to read with purpose, write with honesty, and build a framework that might eventually support a better life. I would have to memorialize the journey, keeping records that showed incremental progress.

Those lessons became the seeds that restored meaning in my life. As I describe in later chapters, growth through the journey would eventually lead to the Straight-A Guide, a ten-part framework for making better decisions:

1. defining success,
2. setting goals that aligned with how I defined success,
3. showing that I had the right attitude, measured by a 100 percent commitment to success,
4. aspiring to something more than the current status of my life,
5. taking incremental action steps,
6. holding myself accountable and measuring progress,

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7. staying aware of opportunities to seize while making others aware of my pursuit of excellence,
8. living authentically,
9. recognizing small achievements because they open new opportunities,
10. and living with gratitude, appreciative of the blessings in my life.

Time in solitary forced me to sit with what I had done, what I had lost, and what I would have to become if I wanted the years ahead to mean anything. In that sense, solitary introduced me to a new way of thinking. Instead of dwelling only on the challenges I faced, I began thinking about the steps I could take to build a better future. That confrontation became the first step toward change.

THE WRITTEN RECORD

Many readers may still be in the earliest stage of their own journey. Some may be pretrial. Some may be preparing to surrender. Some may already be in prison but still resisting the internal work of reflection. I encourage readers to begin where they are, but to begin. Start with the truth as you can presently see it:

- » What decisions brought you here?
- » What have you lost?
- » What part of your thinking needs to change?
- » What first lessons are emerging from this experience?
- » What do you now understand about responsibility?

Those reflections may become the beginning of your biography. They may become journal entries. They may shape the way you later define success and build a release plan. The point is not to wait until the language is perfect. The point is to begin documenting the earliest stage of transformation honestly. By recording your pathway to change, you build an asset you may later leverage in many ways, as I did.

Participants in our courses should understand that the first stage of change may not look impressive. People may not notice, or they may not see you differently from the status you occupy now. That does not mean the act of writing your plans lacks value.

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A person who begins accepting responsibility, learning from adversity, and documenting what he is beginning to understand has already started moving in a better direction. That movement may be slow, but it changes the foundation from which you will make future decisions. There are always more opportunities in the future than in the past, and I encourage every member of our community to become part of the change he wants to see.

The lessons I learned in solitary confinement gave me a different mindset. That new way of thinking influenced the books I later read, the plans I later built, the records I later created, and the opportunities I later pursued.

Everything that followed began there.

SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS

1. What losses or consequences have forced me to think differently about my life?
2. What truth have I been resisting about the decisions that brought me here?
3. What first lesson is this difficult stage trying to teach me about responsibility?
4. In what ways have I wasted gifts, opportunities, or time, and what would it mean to begin rebuilding now?
5. What part of my thinking must change if I want a better future?
6. How should I begin documenting the first stage of my transformation?
7. If this painful chapter of my life became the place where change began, what would I want the next chapter to show?

The first stage of transformation often begins in the hardest place. When a person stops resisting reality, accepts responsibility, and begins learning from adversity, he starts building the foundation for a better future.

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