

CHAPTER 6: THE LEADERS WHO CHANGED MY THINKING

While in prison, I learned that a person can find mentors almost anywhere. Prison may cut a person off from normal life, ordinary work, and the relationships that once shaped his thinking. That does not mean he should stop being intentional about finding mentors or role models who can help shape the way he thinks. If a person is not careful, the prison environment itself will begin shaping the way he sees the world. That perspective can lead to intergenerational cycles of failure.

Although I accepted that I would serve decades in prison, I did not want the external forces in that environment to become my teacher. I needed books. They had a huge influence on my life, opening access to leaders I would never meet in person. Even so, those leaders influenced the way I thought, the way I planned, and the way I used time. Through reading, I began learning from people who had endured adversity, governed themselves with discipline, communicated powerfully, or built lives that reflected purpose and intention.

Those leaders did not all come from the same tradition. Some came from scripture. Some came from philosophy. Some came from history. Some came from business and innovation. Each leader helped me understand something important about how to live more deliberately.

That chapter of my life began in solitary. The Bible became my first teacher. Then Officer Wilson and others opened the door to more reading. I began meeting more mentors through books.

JESUS: RESPONSIBILITY, RETURN, AND STEWARDSHIP

The first and deepest influence on my thinking came from the Bible. It helped me accept that through my past decisions, I had wounded people who loved me. I had squandered trust, opportunity, and freedom. Although I could not erase what I had done, I could begin the difficult work of returning to a better path. Anyone, at any time, could develop abilities and use them productively. Opportunities open for those who do. To build a better future, I would have to work and develop.

That is one reason this workbook repeatedly returns to the importance of documenting the journey, reading with intention, and building a body of work. We should become good stewards of time, using this limited resource to work toward our highest potential.

SOCRATES: ASK BETTER QUESTIONS

Besides bringing me a biography of Frederick Douglass, Officer Wilson brought me Plato's Republic. For the first time, I read about Socrates. I could identify with part of what I read because, like me, Socrates had been confined. He helped me learn how to develop a strategy by asking disciplined questions. As I reflected on those questions, I understood that there were no simple right answers or wrong answers. Each response led to more questions, and those questions helped me develop an adjustment strategy.

Before prison, I had not spent much time introspecting. I had acted, rationalized, and moved on. Socrates forced me to see that we often make poor decisions when we do not examine the reasons behind them or contemplate the results they are likely to bring. Questions began changing the way I thought:

- » Who will have influence over my future?
- » In what ways can I use time today to help stakeholders see me differently?
- » What kind of future do I want to create?
- » What are the first steps I should take to build that future?
- » If I want a different outcome, what must change first?
- » How can I record progress, or build a new record, to show that I do not want my crime or prison term to define me?

Those questions helped me build an adjustment strategy. A person grows when he learns to ask better questions of himself. Those questions can expose denial, clarify priorities, and begin shaping a strategy. In prison, where passivity can easily take over, disciplined questioning becomes one form of self-leadership.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS: OWN THE NARRATIVE

By reading about Frederick Douglass, I learned the power of self-education, communication, and narrative ownership. Douglass did not allow the system that oppressed him to define his life. He became a figure revered in history because, after escaping from slavery, he carved out a path to liberate others. By learning how to

read, write, and communicate, he showed his humanity, his intelligence, and his story in ways that helped build a powerful case for abolition.

While serving my sentence, I aspired to emulate the lessons I learned from him. They brought meaning to my life.

In the criminal justice system, official records will always exist. Indictments, pre-sentence reports, judgments, disciplinary records, and press coverage may all help define how others see a person. Unless the person creates another record, those documents may become the only story people ever know.

Douglass taught me that writing can challenge that limitation. A biography, a journal, a book report, a release plan, or another written record can become part of the way a person takes ownership of the narrative. It can show growth, effort, and preparation that official records do not capture.

That lesson helped shape much of what later became Prison Professors Profiles. People need a place to document who they are becoming, not only a place where others preserve what they did wrong.

VIKTOR FRANKL: MEANING THROUGH SUFFERING

Viktor Frankl influenced me because he showed that suffering does not automatically create wisdom, but suffering can become meaningful if a person chooses his response carefully.

His work helped me understand that even in terrible conditions, a person retains responsibility for how he responds internally. Prison can easily produce bitterness, self-pity, and passivity. Frankl's example suggested another possibility. A person could use suffering as a context in which to develop more strength, more clarity, and more meaning.

Frankl helped me understand that if suffering was going to exist anyway, I had to ask what I would do with it. Would I allow it to harden me, or would I use it to deepen the seriousness with which I approached the future?

That lesson can help anyone facing confinement or another major life crisis. Adversity alone does not build character. The response to adversity does.

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MARCUS AURELIUS: GOVERN YOURSELF FIRST

Marcus Aurelius taught me something related, but with a different emphasis. He reinforced the importance of internal governance.

He ruled an empire, yet so much of what survives from him concerns not external power but internal discipline. He wrote about governing his own responses, obligations, and conduct. Prison stripped away external freedom. If I could not govern my environment, I would have to become much better at governing myself.

Marcus Aurelius helped me think about:

- » routines,
- » self-control,
- » daily discipline,
- » and the importance of building inner order even when outer conditions remain unstable.

This is one reason the Straight-A Guide eventually became so important in my life. It gave structure to self-governance. But long before I had that framework in full, Marcus Aurelius helped me understand the principle: lead yourself first.

NELSON MANDELA: DIGNITY AND LONG-TERM DISCIPLINE

Nelson Mandela demonstrated what long-term discipline looks like under severe confinement.

I did not compare my circumstances to his. Mandela suffered the injustice of wrongful imprisonment for 27 years, yet he refused to give in to bitterness or self-pity. From him, I learned the power of long-range discipline.

Mandela showed that a person grows stronger by refusing to surrender the ability to think and to serve others. Regardless of what authorities took away from him, he still wanted to make life better for the people around him. His example suggested that a person could endure confinement without allowing confinement to consume his identity.

That lesson shaped the way I thought about leadership. A leader must be able to hold a long vision even when immediate conditions feel discouraging.

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MAHATMA GANDHI: BECOME THE CHANGE

Mahatma Gandhi influenced me through a simple but powerful idea: become the change you want to see.

That principle helped me stop waiting for systems to become fair, efficient, or merciful before beginning to build better habits myself. It reminded me that if I wanted a different future, then I would have to start living differently before that future arrived. I would not reach my highest potential by waiting for opportunities to present themselves. I had to prepare myself so that I could create or seize new opportunities.

In the prison context, that means:

- » stop waiting for perfect conditions,
- » stop saying that change will begin later,
- » and start creating the discipline, the writing, the study, and the record now.

That principle remains central to Prison Professors. We are always encouraging people to build the change they want to see in their own lives first.

BUILDERS, INNOVATORS, AND STRATEGIC THINKERS

Other leaders influenced me in more modern ways. I learned from builders and innovators because they helped me think about systems, long-term vision, and disciplined execution.

From people like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, I learned that clarity, design, and focus matter. From other modern builders and strategists, I learned that a person can create extraordinary value by seeing possibilities others ignore and then doing the hard work required to make those possibilities real.

I do not study these people because they are famous. I study them because builders think in systems. They identify a problem. They imagine a solution. They build tools, structures, and processes that move from idea to reality. That way of thinking influenced my work in prison and after prison.

In his memoir, *The Freedom of Money*, CZ wrote extensively about making principled decisions. From him I learned a great deal about structuring time in ways that bring results. Those lessons guide me as I work to build resources for people

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in prison. Anyone can learn from reading the story of his life, which took him from poverty to building successful businesses and focusing on using technology to improve billions of human lives. He taught me the importance of building systems and measuring progress.

Even now, when I think about how to help more justice-impacted people, I am thinking in systems:

- » how to scale education,
- » how to influence change in government bureaucracies,
- » how to use technology more effectively,
- » and how to help more people document progress and prepare for better outcomes.

That way of thinking came from studying leaders and builders.

BOOKS BECAME MENTORS

The larger lesson is that we can find mentors in the books we choose to read. Many of the people who shaped my thinking had died long before I was born. Yet by reading intentionally and reflecting on the lessons I learned from their lives, I could start thinking differently.

A person in prison is not cut off from mentorship if he is willing to study. Even while in solitary, a person can learn. A person facing charges is not cut off from wisdom if he is willing to read. A person who feels isolated can still begin building a council of mentors through the books he chooses and the lessons he records. If he records the journey toward wisdom, he may inspire others to become part of a supportive coalition.

Do not think of book reports as school assignments in the narrow sense. They are part of how a person shows what he is learning, what influences him, and how his thinking is changing over time.

Leaders can still teach you through their books, their lives, and their ideas. For that reason, I encourage you to read with intention. Ask:

- » Why am I reading this?

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- » What does this person teach about adversity, responsibility, discipline, communication, or meaning?
- » How does that lesson apply to my life now?
- » How should I document what I am learning?

That is how reading becomes part of preparation rather than only distraction.

SELF-DIRECTED QUESTIONS

1. What leader, thinker, or writer has influenced the way I see my life most strongly?
2. What lesson from Frederick Douglass, Viktor Frankl, Mandela, Gandhi, Socrates, or another leader could help me now?
3. How can books become mentors in my own journey?
4. What am I reading right now that is changing the way I think?
5. How can I document what I am learning so that others can see the effort I am making?
6. What kind of worldview am I building through the books and ideas I choose?
7. If I became more intentional about reading and writing, how might that affect the next stage of my life?

The people who changed my thinking did not remove my sentence. They helped me learn how to live through it differently. When a person studies strong lives and strong ideas with seriousness, he gives himself a chance to build a stronger life of his own.

