

STRAIGHT-A GUIDE

LESSON FIVE: ASPIRATION

In the earlier lessons of this course, I explained how defining success gives direction, how setting goals creates structure, and how choosing the right attitude sustains effort. Once we put those elements in place, another question emerges:

» What are you striving to become?

That question speaks to aspiration. I consider it very important for people to meditate, or reflect on this question. If they're confined, or living in a crisis, the question has even more relevance.

When we're living in crisis, we have to cope with so many disappointments that we can lose clarity of thought. In my case, authorities locked me in prison when I was only 23. I spent the first year in solitary confinement, and I understood that with my conviction, I would remain incarcerated for multiple decades. I had to find a way to stay motivated as those weeks turned into months, the months turned into years, and the years turned into decades. I had to keep pushing forward even when I received a systemic message that nothing mattered, or that I didn't have anything coming.

I had to aspire to something more, and to keep pushing forward, even in the face of struggle. I got inspired by reading the biography of Frederick Douglass. When he escaped from slavery, he didn't go on to pursue a life of leisure. Instead, he fought to abolish slavery and to turn the crisis of his life into one of meaning, relevance, and dignity, by helping others. I aspired to follow in the footsteps of Frederick Douglass. That aspiration helped me set clear goals, and also helped me to build intrinsic motivation along the way.

» I didn't need the system to change.
» I needed to change.

Aspiration is not wishful thinking. It is the ability to see beyond present circumstances and imagine a future version of yourself that is worth working toward. Without aspiration, success becomes mechanical, goals feel hollow, and attitude eventually erodes.

LEARNING TO ASPIRE UNDER EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES

During my sentencing hearing, the judge warned that I would be an old man by the time I walked out of prison. He imposed a 45-year sentence. Afterward, two U.S. Marshals transported me back to the detention center, and officers escorted me into the same solitary cell where I had lived for the previous year.

At that moment, I could not comprehend how to endure decades in prison. Instead of focusing on the full sentence, I narrowed my attention to what I could accomplish in the first ten years. Breaking an overwhelming future into smaller horizons allowed me to regain a sense of control.

Inside that cell, I read the Bible and reflected on the misguided decisions that had brought me there. Stories about Joseph, the Prodigal Son, and the Parable of the Talents brought me hope. My sister and father visited me each week, standing in long lines just to give me a short break from isolation. I felt ashamed, but I also felt something new taking shape.

Determination.

I wanted to transform into a person who contributed value to society. I did not want to disappoint my family again. Their support kept hope alive when the environment around me offered none.

ASPIRATION IS THE ABILITY TO SEE FORWARD

An officer named Wilson also influenced my transformation. He brought me books that exposed me to new ways of thinking. Through reading, reflection, and solitude, I learned that aspiration is not about denying reality. It is about refusing to be defined solely by it.

Rather than remaining trapped in regret, I learned to aspire to a better version of myself. Later, I would write about those lessons and organize them into The Straight-A Guide. I devoted one of the core modules to Aspiration, because in challenging circumstances, we must be able to envision what we can become.

Aspiration gave me a future to work toward before I had any visible path to reach it.

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ASPIRATION CONNECTS VISION TO ACTION

When I allowed myself to imagine life beyond confinement, I saw myself free, wearing a suit and tie, standing confidently before others without being judged for the worst decisions of my youth or the years I spent in prison.

That vision gave me strength. It helped me recalibrate and develop confidence.

Once I had a clear aspiration, I could:

- » Build plans aligned with that vision.
- » Set priorities that supported long-term growth.
- » Make daily decisions with future impact in mind.

Aspiration gave meaning to the goals I set and reinforced the attitude I chose to maintain. Over time, it helped me preserve dignity, prepare for a successful transition, and eventually achieve financial independence.

ASPIRATION MUST BE BIGGER THAN THE MOMENT

Aspiration does not require certainty. It requires courage.

Today, I still rely on the same principle. I aspire to share these lessons with more than one million people, whether through partnerships with organizations like the Edovo Foundation, collaboration with correctional systems, or digital platforms that allow anyone to download and use my work.

Life advances through incremental progress. Even when we feel trapped, figuratively or literally, aspiration lights the path forward. It gives purpose to effort and resilience to adversity.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING EXERCISE

Complete the following exercise in writing:

1. Describe the person you aspire to become, independent of your current circumstances.
 - » Focus on character, contribution, and capability.
 - » Explain why that aspiration matters to you.
 - » How does it connect to your values and the people you care about?

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2. Identify one decision you can make this week that aligns with that aspiration.

» This is a small action that reflects your future self.

At the end of the week, ask yourself:

3. Did my decisions reflect the person I aspire to become?

» If not, what adjustment will I make next week?

Aspiration transforms struggle into preparation. It turns time into investment and crisis into possibility.

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