

## LESSON 10: ASPIRING TO MORE

A noble man compares and estimates himself by an idea which is higher than himself. Such pursuits produce aspirations.

—Marcus Aurelius

We open this section with a quote from Marcus Aurelius. His book, *Meditations*, inspired me while I served my sentence. I always found it helpful to read about people who began their lives in a challenging environment. If they triumphed over the disadvantageous and difficulties they faced, I believed I could learn lessons from them.

Success always leaves clues that we can follow.

From Marcus Aurelius, I learned the importance of aspiring. If we can train ourselves to learn from others, we gain the power to suppress worthless emotions such as envy. Rather than begrudge the success that others have, we should open our minds to learn the steps they took to reach the position they aspired to achieve.

Marcus Aurelius began his life in an orphanage during the Roman era. As a child, he knew he did not want to live in disadvantaged or marginalized circumstances. Since he was poor, he chose to open his eyes and observe the patterns of behavior that he saw in leaders.

To record what he learned, he kept a journal. That journal guided him on what he should do and should not do. Later, publishers brought his journal to market with the book *Meditations*.

As I recall, Marcus Aurelius wrote that book to guide his future decisions and to teach lessons to his son and others. Although he lived more than 1,000 years ago, *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius remains one of those influential books in the self-help genre.

From Marcus Aurelius, I learned the importance of journaling. Through journaling, we can memorialize the methodical steps we take to prepare for success after prison. Participants who document their journey inside may have more power in reaching their aspirations.



First, a person must aspire to something more than what they're currently experiencing. While living with the pressures of confinement, we need to muster the strength to fight off the stress. Those walls and bars can feel like they're closing in, and our aspirations can free us from the pressure.

Like many others in prison, I felt the pressure. Yet leaders teach us that if we remember how every decision influences our prospects for success, we empower ourselves.

Never forget the reality that at any time, we can choose to work toward empowering ourselves.

Had I learned that concept in school—before I broke the law—I may have made better decisions as a young man. By reflecting, I could see that my choices before I turned 20 had as much to do with my imprisonment as my crimes. Instead of learning from leaders, I learned from people of questionable character. That failed strategy put me on a destructive path.

Fortunately, it's never too early and never too late to begin working toward self-improvement. The strategy I learned from leaders like Marcus Aurelius is twofold.

- » We must reflect on our past decisions and connect the dots, so we know how those decisions led to our current situation, and
- » We must aspire to what we want to become and then figure out the changes we must make to reach our full potential.

As a reckless adolescent, I chose to ignore my teachers, guidance counselors, and advice from my parents. The friends with whom I surrounded myself used similar judgment. All those choices led me into a life of crime by the time I turned 20. At 23, I started serving a 45-year prison term.

I should have made better choices while in school. Fortunately, I started to make better decisions when I began my prison term. By aspiring to something better, I could carve out a strategy to help me succeed when I would walk out of federal prison—26 years after my arrest.

## How to Aspire:

After my arrest, I learned what living in a total institution meant. I felt like a cog in a machine. Regardless of how much I would have liked to change



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the machine, I couldn't. Administrators would determine the clothes I wore, the food I ate, the books I read, and my ability to interact with others.

I'd lost my liberty. I didn't know how to liberate myself, but I knew I loathed living in prison. Despite the challenge, like every person striving toward a better life, I had to build a positive mindset and prepare. Without preparation, I wouldn't be able to seize opportunities around me or create new opportunities.

When we look beyond our current struggles, we may find light, something worth working toward. Forcing ourselves to ignore the concrete walls and barbed-wire-topped fences requires discipline. As Socrates taught me, we can always ask good questions to develop our critical thinking.

## TAKE 15 MINUTES

10-1: Develop your critical thinking by responding to any of the following questions:

What does the best possible outcome look like for me?

Who would be the people that could influence my prospects of getting that outcome?

How can I influence people to invest in the future I'm building?

In what ways will the decisions I've made over the past month open new opportunities?

What are the characteristics of people who have overcome the challenges I face?

What lessons can I learn from reading about those people?

Let me recap what we learned from earlier lessons:

- » We define success by stating our values.
- » We commit to values by setting clear goals.
- » We succeed by living with the right attitude.
- » We show our commitment to having "the right attitude" with our 100% commitment to the values and goals we set.



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When I write about “aspiring,” I want to convey the importance of seeing the best possible outcome. Instead of dwelling on the pain we’re living with today, we can focus on what we’re going to become by adhering to our disciplined, deliberate adjustment plan. We need a program that will help us reach our highest potential. That plan will require us to put priorities in place.

One priority may be to visualize success. We can project the future we want to live as Marcus Aurelius did. Instead of seeing himself as a disadvantaged child in an orphanage, he saw himself as a community leader. He trained himself to become a person of influence by learning from others. In time, those aspirations led to actions that lifted him to become one of the most influential emperors of the Roman empire. He wrote a biography to help him stay on track, and to show others how to grow from struggle to self-empowerment.

To develop better critical thinking, Consider the following exercises to begin developing your release plan:

## TAKE 15 MINUTES

10-2: Respond to the following questions:

Describe the future you see for yourself.

Write at least three persuasive paragraphs that explain the steps you’ve taken over the past month to move you closer to the success you aspire to become.

Write how your actions over the past three months have put you in a position to seize opportunities over the next three months.

How would people that you want to influence respond to the adjustment strategy you engineered?

How would the people you admire most respond to what you’re striving to achieve?



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Our aspirations strengthen us and help us conquer challenges. They weaken the pull of anything that could potentially hold us back. When we aspire to create a better future that we can see, we empower ourselves to engineer a path that will lead us to where we want to go.

Leaders like Marcus Aurelius taught me that success is a journey, not a destination. The day we stop pursuing success, we wither. Over time, our values and goals will evolve, depending upon what we achieve. For example, immediately after my arrest, I only wanted the system to release me.

After reading and learning from leaders, I started to perceive life differently. I wanted to build a record that would restore confidence and allow me to live a life of meaning, relevance, and dignity.

Wishing to emulate Socrates or Mandela, I wanted to develop inner strength. I didn't want to complain about my predicament. I made terrible decisions that put me in prison. I wanted to create a path that would lead to something better, pursuing aspirations that I believed would bring more meaning to my life. I wanted to make an impact on building a better society.

As I strive to show through the various modules of this course, my values and goals evolved during my adjustment. They always aligned with my aspiration of how I wanted to walk out of prison—and the life I wanted to lead once I got out. Our values and goals should harmonize with our aspirations.

## TAKE 15 MINUTES

10-3: Respond to the following questions:

How will your values and goals evolve?

What will change with your values and goals as you advance through the stages of your confinement?

In what ways are you working to reach your highest potential?



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## The Labyrinth

When I was locked up, my aspiration served as a light. I had a long way to go, but I could always see the light at the end. The light guided my decisions. I didn't see that light as a student in school, and during those first days after my arrest, I didn't know how to find a light that could guide my future decisions.

Leaders helped me to see the world differently. They helped me learn how to project the future I wanted to build, and they helped me understand why I would have to make decisions differently from how I spent my teens.

Although I didn't start selling cocaine until I was 20, I started making bad decisions during my troubled adolescence. Those decisions led me into a dark pit or a labyrinth. Aspirations could provide the light I could follow to lead me out.

I learned about labyrinths (pronounced lab-i-rinth) when I began reading the work of masterminds. While locked in my cell at the Pierce County Jail (before my sentencing date), I escaped the monotony by reading. One book I read included a story about a labyrinth.

Some readers may not grasp the definition of a labyrinth. I didn't. But the concept of finding my way out of the labyrinth inspired me. This concept could empower anyone who is in prison. We need stories of self-mastery and discipline to help us make better decisions.

Just as Socrates influenced me to change the way I thought, other authors from ancient Greece gave me a lot to consider. I especially liked to read from the stoic philosophers—who taught a great deal about being self-reliant and self-directed. Those virtues could help anyone commit to making better decisions.

## Greek Mythology

From the many stories of Greek mythology, I learned lessons. One story described Theseus, a mythological king who offered hope and an example of self-mastery. That story introduced me to the concept of a “labyrinth,” an intricate maze buried deep underground.



Theseus had to save his community from a beast known as a minotaur. The minotaur resided in the labyrinth buried deep in the ground. It had a pattern of killing the youth in the Greek community. To resolve the problem, someone needed to kill the beast—but no one that descended into the minotaur’s labyrinth ever made it out alive. Either the beast devoured those that entered, or the individual got lost within the maze and died.

Theseus valued his community and aspired to save its youth. To kill the beast, Theseus made a plan. Before entering the labyrinth, armed with a sword, he tied one end of a string around his ankle and the other around a tree at the maze’s entrance. After killing the beast, Theseus used the line to find his way through the labyrinth and back out to safety.

## Identifying with the Labyrinth

That analogy gave me hope. Although I could reflect on my youth’s influences and bad decisions, I could also project a better life. Like Theseus had to kill the beast to build the future he wanted for his community, I would have to develop the discipline to reject or resist triggers that could lead me to further problems. I would need a plan that would lead me out of the labyrinth of confinement and into the future I aspired to build.

In my youth, I hated getting up in the morning for school and couldn’t relate to how learning would lead to a better life. Since I didn’t have any aspirations, I didn’t have a reason to learn. Going to school didn’t inspire me because I didn’t connect reading and studying with success. Without an aspiration for something better, I made decisions that led me into prison—a labyrinth that keeps many people locked in struggle.

Statistics show that most people struggle when they leave prison. For this reason, a person must live like the stoics—becoming self-reliant and self-directed.

I wanted a fulfilling life in prison and beyond. To succeed, I would need a release plan.



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## TAKE 15 MINUTES

10-4: Develop your critical thinking with your responses to the following questions:

What do you want?

When will you start pursuing what you want?

How much effort are you willing to invest in getting what you want?

What preparations are you making to build a better life?

In what ways are your decisions influencing your community?

Who bears responsibility for the success that you want to achieve?

Those questions helped me accept that if I wanted a better future, I would have to prepare. To start preparing, I needed a plan.

Without an effective release plan, the avatars I tried to bring into my life would dismiss me as a person prone to “happy talk,” offering words without backing things up. Or a person with “happy ears,” prone to believing others who would define my future. To move closer to my aspirations of a fulfilling life, I had to make the right choices.

Every person bears responsibility for the choices we make.

I rejected education as a youth. That choice brought consequences that I didn't intend. Once I started to serve my sentence in prison, I had to make adjustment choices about how I would live in the culture of confinement. Other people in prison offered advice of dubious value. They advised me on the best way to serve time, admonishing me to “Forget about the outside world and focus on life inside.”

If I made that choice, I had to think about what would follow.



## TAKE 5 MINUTES

10-5: What do you think will follow if you adjust to the prison culture and dismiss a personal responsibility to prepare for success upon release?

I can give you an example. Think of a shot caller in prison. The choice to live as a shot caller brings consequences. The shot caller may control the television. He may direct where people sit in common areas.

What would you say follows for someone that pursues such an adjustment?

From my recollection of living in prison, a shot caller can expect the following:

- » They face problems with staff.
- » They spend time in SHU.
- » SHU time can also mean a more extended stay in prison.
- » SHU time means less access to opportunities to prepare for success.
- » Lower preparations for success can mean fewer opportunities for employment after release.
- » Fewer opportunities for jobs may translate into a more difficult time generating resources.
- » Without resources, it's harder to gain traction in society.
- » Without traction, it's harder to resume stability.
- » Without stability, more problems with the law follow.
- » Problems can lead to more time in prison.
- » The cycle of failure would continue.

Without a doubt, I wanted a different outcome. I set values and goals to define success. My attitude showed a 100 percent commitment to staying out of prison. My aspiration kept me on course.



## Aspirations:

Masterminds teach that we always aspire to success. When we see success, we begin to build. Pursue the deliberate path, even if you're locked in a cell.

Leaders like Frederick Douglass, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Viktor Frankl, and Martin Luther King aspired to end social injustice. They took clear steps to succeed. Even while living in a struggle, they knew what steps to take. Leaders like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Jack Welch aspired to build businesses that would ease life for millions of people. They knew what they wanted. They set a path to success, and they inspired others to follow their path.

Participants in our course can choose to prepare for the careers they want to lead, or they can make choices without a disciplined plan. Either way, they make a choice. And the choices we make have consequences, as recidivism rates show. We may develop the power to make better decisions when considering likely outcomes.

## Aspirations Mean Looking Ahead

At the start of my sentence, I thought about the best possible outcome. I had to look far ahead, decades ahead. Unless I made changes, my return to society would bring many struggles:

- » I would not have a work history.
- » I would not have financial resources.
- » I would not know anyone other than those serving time with me in prison.
- » I would not have any credit.
- » I would not have any clothes.
- » I would not have a place to live.
- » I would not have resources saved for retirement.
- » I would not have a car.

Those thoughts could weigh me down. Fortunately, I found courage and hope in stories like Theseus in the labyrinth. All I needed was a string. A



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string could guide me from the depths of my labyrinth to the brightness of a better world.

I wish I had found that string at a younger age—but I didn't. Nevertheless, stoics like Marcus Aurelius taught me that it's never too early and never too late to start making better decisions.

My values, goals, and attitude would become my string. By following that string, I could reach the aspirations I wanted for the new life I would lead.

## Ten-Year Aspirations:

Another Greek myth, the story of Homer's Odysseus, inspired me. The tale describes Odysseus, a man separated from his family and home after fighting a war. Despite his separation, he never lost sight of home or his aspiration to return. Odysseus spent ten years fighting battle after battle. His aspiration sustained him, and he made a 100% commitment to succeed. Knowing what he wanted, Odysseus had the right attitude! That attitude brought him closer to his aspiration. After ten years, he reached his aspiration, returning home in victory.

Homer's Odysseus inspired me to set a ten-year plan. I didn't expect to return home in ten years, but if I stayed true to my values and goals, I would be farther ahead. New opportunities would open. I knew that every decision I made during the first ten years in prison would influence my life.

I learned about aspirations during the nascent stages of my journey. Back then, I couldn't think of 26 years in prison. I hadn't even lived that long. To put the term in perspective, project into the future by 26 years. A person needs an aspiration to maintain a high level of discipline and energy throughout the decades. My strategy followed the path of Theseus and Odysseus—using aspirations to help me see the reasons for the decisions I would make. I set my initial aspiration for ten years.

During that first decade, I knew what I would need to achieve. I could see success.

And what would success look like for me?

- » Within ten years, I would have at least one university degree.



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- » I would find someplace to publish an article, chapter, or book I wrote within ten years.
- » Within ten years, I would start my support network by bringing ten new people into my life.

Those aspirations strengthened me, helping me to see success and empowering me to measure progress on the journey. I didn't persevere over matters beyond my control, like my sentence length. Instead, I aspired to a better life and worked to prepare. Advancing along the path led me to restore the strength and confidence that the prison system and my sentence had once obliterated.

## **Restoring Strength and Dignity:**

Masterminds teach us that we shouldn't live like a prisoner. We shouldn't allow calendar pages to anchor us in a pool of hopeless thoughts. We shouldn't dwell on the past or parts of life we can't control.

We should focus on what we have the power to change. Like the stoics, we can choose to live in the world as it exists, not as we want it to be. Each day brings an opportunity to work toward something better. We can make decisions that show we want to climb out of the labyrinth of confinement.

Throughout each of my 9,500 days in prison, I considered my values and goals. Adhering to this disciplined strategy positioned me for the best possible outcome. If I ignored those values and goals, I became vulnerable. The wrong decisions could quickly derail my progress. After all, I lived in prison, where I would remain for decades. People around me could be volatile. Fights would erupt over trivial issues. Television programming, noise, personal space, or perceived respect could bring problems. I couldn't ignore those realities. Instead, I needed a strategy to succeed despite threats that could block progress.

Good decisions could lead me closer to my aspiration. Wrong choices could threaten progress. This insight helped me assess flawed ideas that I heard from others. Bad ideas can derail people in prison. For example, consider how some people in prison think about "respect" and what the term means.



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## Respect or Fear?

As a young person, I heard many experienced prisoners talking about respect. For example, Stump said anyone in prison could get respect by being willing to pay the price, and he said the cost would be to respond immediately with treacherous or lethal violence at any sign of “disrespect.” Others would “respect” a man, he said, if they knew that he would retaliate to any disrespect with a knife.

Stump’s perspective matched the prison culture. Yet, that perspective differed from my avatar’s concept of respect.

I never aspired to become “the man” in prison. Instead, I wanted to succeed when I returned to society, which would require preparation.

With success in mind, I had a reason to avoid problems. I wanted to sidestep the cycles of failure that others faced when they finished their terms. My avatars defined respect differently from Stump and the general mentality of the prison environment.

I wanted respect from my avatars, and I made decisions that were consistent with my aspiration.

## Who Will Facilitate Your Success?

My avatars would not respect me if I pursued a path involving violence. They would “fear” people that responded to problems with violence. They would want that person to stay in prison.

My 100% commitment to living a values-based, goal-oriented life influenced my decisions, adjustment, and the release plan that would lead to the life I aspired to build. My aspiration influenced every step I took and every decision I made. I made decisions that would minimize exposure to problems.

What did avoiding problems and pursuing success mean for me?

- » I avoided hustles.
- » I avoided television rooms.
- » I didn’t participate in team sports or table games.
- » I selected jobs that would allow me to work toward my goals.



- » I was deliberate about my conversations, the words I used, and the activities I pursued.

Every step felt like crossing a high wire, with each deliberate action leading closer to my aspiration. One false step could lead to my fall. The clear aspiration gave me reasons to continue the journey to success as I defined it.

My wife picked me up from USP Atwater to drive me to a halfway house on August 13, 2012. I'd serve six months in the San Francisco halfway house and the last six months of my sentence in home confinement. While driving to San Francisco, I told Carole I intended to follow the same disciplined, deliberate strategy that got me through prison to adjust to society.

I had values and goals in place. But they evolved from the values and ideals I set when I started my term. My decisions in prison lifted me to a higher status, opening more opportunities. I had bachelor's and master's degrees. I contributed to society, as evidenced by the many books I published. I had thousands of people in my support network.

When my wife drove me from the prison in Atwater to San Francisco, I told her of my new aspiration:

I'll control assets worth more than \$1 million within five years of finishing my sentence.

I aspired to make an impact on the lives of other people in prison. If I achieved that goal, I believed that I could inspire more people to adhere to the values-based, goal-oriented principles I would teach through the Straight-A Guide. As we try to teach through our Preparing for Success after Prison series, a person must:

- » Define success with values,
- » Set SMART goals that align with how the person defines success.
- » Go forward with the right attitude, showing a 100 percent commitment.
- » Act in ways that align with a person's responsibility to prepare for success.
- » Use an aspiration to stay motivated through the challenges ahead.



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Success follows for anyone that adheres to that principled path. Future modules will show you what comes next in our Straight-A Guide. For me, that path led to a portfolio of assets worth far more than \$1 million. Decisions in prison influenced my ongoing commitment to preparing for success.

## TAKE 15 MINUTES

10-6: Where will you be in 10 years?

10-7: How will your decisions today lead you closer to your aspiration?

10-8: Will you be closer to the aspirations you set?



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