

LESSON 4: AWARENESS AND AUTHENTICITY

Keep Your Head in the Game

ANNOTATION: AWARENESS AND AUTHENTICITY

Opportunities exist all around us, but we don't see them if we don't open our eyes. When we're aware, we keep our eyes open for the possibility of seizing or creating opportunities. They become more abundant when we're authentic, keeping everything we think, say, and do in harmony. Staying aware of how our daily actions relate to how we define success leads others to appreciate our authenticity.

AWARENESS:

As human beings, sometimes we fall off track. If we're living according to the principles of the Straight-A Guide, we can recalibrate. That means we stop perpetuating the problem and start working toward the solution.

Nurse Tina is a great example of someone who understood the importance of getting back on track.

I spoke with Tina during a time of crisis. She is a wife and a mother of five but also faced challenges that would complicate her life.

Tina told me that, as a child, she lived in Southern New Jersey, not even knowing that she was poor. Her grandmother played a pivotal role in her life. As a teenager, she moved into an area she described as a ghetto of Trenton. Tina's grandmother reared her in the Christian faith, emphasizing the importance of education. With that guidance, Tina could avoid complications derailing opportunities for many other people who spent their formative years in poverty.

Tina attended a Bible college and earned an undergraduate degree. She began earning a living in her chosen career. Since her grandmother had played such a pivotal role in her life, Tina wanted to comfort her and provide the best quality of life for her grandmother's end-of-life experience. Later,



her grandmother needed 24-hour care. Tina wanted to provide comfort and care for everyone in the convalescent home, so she understood that she would have to learn more.

It would be one thing to say that she wanted to provide the best care, but it's quite another to prepare in ways that would allow her to give the best care. Aware of what it would take to reach her highest potential as a caregiver, Tina made a commitment. She enrolled in nursing school.

What did it mean for her to become a nurse?

It meant that Tina would have to return to school. Many people find it challenging to study math and science as adults. But Tina thrived in an academic environment because she had a purpose: she knew that by earning a bachelor's degree in nursing, other healthcare professionals would see her authenticity.

TO BE AUTHENTIC, A PERSON HAD TO:

Define success,

Develop an awareness that would help her create a plan,

Put priorities in place, and

Execute the plan.

By applying herself, Tina worked through courses that included microbiology, anatomy and physiology, and other coursework that would prepare her to pass exams necessary to work as a board-certified registered nurse. With those credentials, Tina could do more than comfort patients in need. As a licensed healthcare provider, she could also treat them within her scope of nursing practice.

Tina became a role model for her five children and anyone wanting to see a model of excellence. To succeed, she had to stay aware of opportunities and be authentic in her commitment.

As a registered nurse, Tina had the skills to serve her community during the COVID pandemic. Administrators frequently needed her to work in the hospital for 18-hour shifts, trying to save people's lives. The stress from



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being in such constant proximity to death, without time for her family, took a toll on her.

During the duress of the COVID crisis, she became susceptible to a pitch by a conman. When he promised her an easier life during that unusual phase of her career, she made an aberrational decision that violated the law.

To save the economy, the Small Business Administration began offering loans to support businesses that struggled because of the COVID crisis. The conman pitched Tina, promising that the government supported a transfer of wealth. That idea sounded good to Tina. She needed hope for something better than the long hours she worked and the proximity to so many people dying. He told her that he could do the following:

- Set businesses up for her,
- Operate those businesses,
- Create jobs with those businesses, and
- Generate profits for Tina.

When she asked him what it would cost, the charlatan told her it wouldn't cost her anything. She would simply need to sign documents that he prepared. Those documents, he said, would qualify her to receive loans from the government. Once the Small Business Administration funded the loans, Tina would turn the resources over to the conman so that he could use them to build the businesses that they would own together. He promised to structure the loans so that Tina's business would not need to make payments for two years. By then, he pledged that the businesses would generate sufficient income to repay the debt.

He misled her into believing that she could own businesses without using her own money—only her credit. But all that glitters is not gold. The conman deluded Tina, and in her fragile state of mind from work exhaustion, she agreed to sign the documents he prepared, hoping they would help her escape the stress of caring for COVID patients at a hospital in Jersey City.

The swindler had duped Tina. Based on the documents he submitted, the government funded the loans, obligating Tina to repay them. The



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government's Small Business Administration deposited approximately \$300,000 into bank accounts that Tina controlled.

As soon as the resources came in, Tina turned the money over to the fraudster, believing he would execute the plan. After a few weeks, she realized he had entangled her into a mess. She began to worry that she had broken the law.

Tina began reading the documents he prepared. When she read that the documents included fraudulent information about employees and past revenues, she felt as if she had walked into a labyrinth, but she didn't know how to get out.

Tina pleaded with the swindler to return the funds so that she could send them back to the government. He refused, telling her that he had already used the money to start the businesses.

For months, Tina tried to believe the problem would go away. She lost sleep. She felt anxious. She knew that she had done wrong, and she wanted to make things right.

As many people have done before, Tina had fallen off track. She reverted to the pathway that led to her earlier success in getting back on track. She began reading to become aware of the steps to surrender voluntarily.

The government had not charged her with a crime, yet she couldn't stand living with the guilt of what she had done. Being authentic, to her, meant accepting responsibility and moving forward with her life—even though she understood that she would have to endure some pain to make things right. To recalibrate, Tina contacted the Department of Justice, offering to surrender, cooperate, and create a plan to demonstrate her remorse.

TAKE TEN MINUTES (4-1):

Write responses to the following questions in approximately ten minutes. If participating in a class setting, discuss verbally.

4-1: How do you stay aware of opportunities to transform your life?



4-2: How do you think prosecutors responded to Tina’s unsolicited admission of guilt?

4-3: Describe steps a person could take to demonstrate authenticity when it comes to remorse.

THE U-SHAPED CURVE:

As people go through the prison system, perspectives change. Like Tina, anyone who faces a criminal charge instantly becomes a “justice-impacted” person. That means the person should become aware of opportunities to seize or create. When a person shows commitment to learning, growing, and making things right, others become aware of the individual’s character and integrity. People may try to fake authenticity, like the person who defrauded Tina. Yet as the Bible tells us, castles built on sand cannot stand.

Knowing that in time, I wanted to advocate for reforms that would improve outcomes for all stakeholders in the prison system, I began reading. I had to become more aware of how the system operated to change the system. I wanted to learn more about different theories. One of those theories used the metaphor of the U-Shaped curve.

Regardless of sentence length, or phase, the theory held people’s adjustment would follow through three phases that would trace the pattern of a U. At the top of the U, in the first phase, we could imagine the culture of the broader society. At the bottom of the U, we had the middle phase, the prison culture. And on the upside of the U, we moved into the third phase.

In the first phase, when authorities first bring people into the system, they experience a high degree of separation from family, friends, and everything they take for granted. As time passes, they move into the middle phase. They develop routines and grow more accustomed to the prison experience. By the time a person gets to the mid-way point of the sentence, the person knows prison well. He is more at ease with the circumstances. Then, the person begins climbing toward the other side of the U, the third phase. As release dates get closer and they know they’re getting back to the broader community, the anxiety comes back. They wonder how they will adjust.



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Similarly, Tina went through phases. Once she realized that she had signed her name to documents that included fraudulent information, she suffered from anxiety and unbearable guilt, expecting that she would need to answer for her crime in time. Wanting to make things right, she took action by first becoming more aware of steps she could take to recalibrate. As she anticipated various stages of the criminal justice system, she began to restore confidence. Authenticity meant going through the pains of a U-shaped curve that would likely bring her into the judicial and prison experience.

As a young man, I didn't have the same good-character traits as Tina. I never considered turning myself in or admitting that I had broken the law. It wasn't until Officer Wilson began passing me books about Socrates and others that I began to see the world differently. I had already made a series of very bad decisions, including:

- Organizing a group that would sell cocaine,

- Denying my culpability after my arrest,

- Going through trial and perjuring myself with lies about not being guilty.

Those decisions would have consequences, including a sentence requiring me to serve 26 years. While going through the first phase of my U, reading about Socrates, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X, I developed more insight into what authenticity would mean. They inspired me to want to learn more so that, in time, I could build credibility so that people I admired me would see my commitment and authenticity.

I needed to go through a long adjustment. I wouldn't reach the midway point until I served 13 years. Yet I knew precisely how I wanted to emerge once I exited prison. Like Frederick Douglass, I tried to use my time inside to make a difference or improve system outcomes. The SWOT analysis helped me realize the importance of making intentional decisions.

While working through the down leg of my U, I intended to strengthen my weaknesses. To become an effective advocate for reform, I would first need to develop skills and earn credentials.

As Tina's example shows us, a person shouldn't simply talk about wanting to succeed. A person must become aware of opportunities and be authentic in pursuing those growth opportunities.



Preparations for success after prison resembles preparations for success everywhere. We must be aware of what it takes and be authentic with our commitment to preparations. For example, when Tina aspired to become the best caregiver for her grandmother and others, she sought information on becoming a nurse. Making herself aware of nursing school led to her earning such credentials.

Knowing that I wanted to learn, I began writing to universities. Not knowing the names of people to write, I created a template letter that I could send to any university. In essence, the letter said:

Dear Admissions Officer,

My name is Michael Santos. I am in prison. I write with a request to attend your university so that I can earn academic credentials. I am serving a lengthy term in federal prison. While incarcerated, I hope to learn. By learning, I believe that I can prepare to live as a contributing citizen upon release.

If opportunities open for me to study with your university, please advise.

By sending a version of that letter to scores of universities, I made administrators aware of me. Although some of those administrators may have dismissed a letter from a person in prison, I found others who offered to help. Through those efforts, I became a university student. Once the university sent books and courses that I could complete through correspondence, I felt as if my life had changed. In an instant, I wasn't only a person in prison. I was a student.

Before prison, as a teenager, I hadn't prepared well to matriculate through university studies. That lack of earlier preparation meant that I had to complete some remedial studies and work extra hard to grasp basic concepts.

I found an example of excellence by reading The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Although the first part of that biography profiled the influences that led to his life as a criminal, the second part showed how he used time in solitary cells to become a better student. Knowing he wanted to become a better communicator, Malcolm became autodidactic, studying the dictionary. By learning new words, he realized that he could empower himself.



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In the example of Malcolm X, we learn the importance of being aware of opportunities. If we don't open our eyes, we cannot see. But if we open our eyes, we may see pathways that will take us from where we are today to all we want to experience. Leaders leave us clues on how they prepare for success. We must choose whether we want to be authentic in that pursuit.

TAKE TEN MINUTES (4-2):

Write responses to the following questions in approximately ten minutes. If participating in a class setting, discuss verbally.

4-4: In what ways do you anticipate your adjustment changing as you move through the U-shaped curve?

4-5: In what way would expanding your vocabulary, or fluency with language, influence how others perceive you?

4-6: In what way would the accumulation of credentials help or hinder authenticity?

Regardless of what bad decisions we may have made in the past, at any time, we can begin making good decisions. Yet we must always anticipate that people will question our authenticity. Therefore, we must always keep our heads in the game, knowing the opportunity costs that accompany every decision we make.

As a young man, I used to listen to classical rock, and I remember the lyrics from a song by the Rolling Stones: "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need."

Like every other person in prison, I wanted to get out. After my judge sentenced me to serve a 45-year prison term, the US Marshalls transferred me to a high-security penitentiary. I had been locked in solitary cells, incarcerated for about a year in pre-trial proceedings before I walked on the penitentiary's yard. While going through transit, I became more aware of the inner workings of the federal prison system.

The more I learned about the system, the more I wanted to engineer an adjustment plan. In time, I hoped the adjustment plan would lead to a more



successful release. More importantly, I hoped that plan would help me emulate the leadership of Frederick Douglass—making me an authentic voice for prison and sentence reform.

Although other people in prison advised that the best way to serve time would be to forget about the world outside and focus on a prison reputation, I hated being in prison. If I spent all my time trying to fit into the prison system, I would learn skills that might help me fit in with the prison society. Yet those skills seemed unlikely to advance me as a candidate for the success I wanted to experience on the other side of the journey. By the time I would move into the latter phase of my prison experience, I hoped that others would view me as being authentic in my quest to advocate for a better prison experience.

In the mid-1980s, the prison system was in a transitional stage. For decades, judges had used an indeterminate sentencing system. In other words, a judge would impose a sentence after a jury convicted a person, or a person pled guilty. Yet the system had a series of mechanisms that would serve as release valves. For example, people could file motions allowing them to ask a judge to reconsider the sentence. If the judge agreed that the sentence no longer served the interests of justice, he would have jurisdiction to reconsider.

Besides filing judicial motions seeking relief from the sentence, people could get relief through administrative mechanisms from either the prison system or from the US Parole Commission. The prison system incentivized people to avoid disciplinary infractions with credit for “good time.” By avoiding disciplinary infractions, people could complete the sentence much sooner than the time a judge imposed. For example, my judge sentenced me to 45 years. If I did not lose any good time for violating disciplinary rules, I could complete that sentence in 26 years—or 9,500 days. Every person in federal prison could earn credit for good behavior—or receive credit for avoiding bad behavior.

The US Parole Commission provided another release mechanism under the indeterminate sentencing system. It operated as a separate body from the Bureau of Prisons. When I began serving my sentence, members of the Parole Board would visit the prison. Typically, a person who qualified would meet with the Board after he completed one-third of the sentence imposed. During that time, he could work to build a personal case showing



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why he was a worthy candidate for release on parole. If members of the Board agreed, they would allow him to return home. If he abided by the conditions of release, he would be able to live in society, go to work, and in many ways, resume his life.

If a person's statutory conviction did not render him ineligible for release on parole, the person could expect to serve a third of the sentence in prison and the remainder on parole in the community. If a person had a sentence of longer than 30 years, even a life sentence, the US Parole Commission could consider the person for release on parole after ten years.

That sentencing law changed for anyone convicted after November 1, 1987. After that cutoff date, people would serve determinate sentences, also known as "truth-in-sentencing" laws. If a judge imposed a sentence, the person could expect to serve at least 85% of the sentence. Those sentences became known as the "guideline" era, one contributor to America's movement to mass incarceration.

While I advanced through different stages of my sentence, I hoped to build credentials that would lead to improvements of the system. As Jim Collins wrote about in his book *Good to Great*, advocacy for prison and sentence reform would become my BHAG—Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal.

TAKE TEN MINUTES (4-3):

Write responses to the following questions in approximately ten minutes. If participating in a class setting, discuss verbally.

4-7: In what way could awareness influence preparations before sentencing?

4-8: What steps could a person take to shape perceptions of stakeholders?

4-9: How are the interests of stakeholders similar or different from the interests of people going through the system?

