

HOOD TO HOOD: FROM PRISONER TO PROFESSOR

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I am writing my story because it was hard for me to accept anything outside of what I knew. I had things figured out and knew I was on my correct path. I was wrong! I wanted to believe that I could get on the correct path but I did not have the mind to imagine my potential and possibility. From age 38 to 42, 1998 to 2002, I was incarcerated in the Minnesota Department of Corrections and more than I knew humanly possible, I was determined to find my path and live it even though it would involve pain. Nevertheless, I was determined to begin my life's journey.

I believe that all men share a certain level of dysfunction that lead to many problems that manifest themselves in society. When I reflect back to my life in the "hood" in Illinois, prior to my prison experience, I recall that I had things backwards. One problem is that I bought into the egalitarian view of work only to realize that there was an employment glass ceiling in place where I could see upward mobility but was blocked from achieving it because this fast tract was reserved for a privilege few.

Another problem was as an African-American, I learned very early in life that the cops and courts had a double standard. Even when I was a youth, I watched as white youth were caught engaging in illegal activities. It appeared law enforcement simply referred them to social workers or school staff. On the other hand my cousins, my friends and I were labeled delinquents for the same acts. I did not realize that having few positive role models, and not having my father in my life, made my path to prison as a rite of passage to manhood, nearly inevitable.

Street Capitalist

So being frustrated with it all, I entered the stereotypical world of "Street Capitalism," a world of drugs, gangs, graft, gambling and other forms of crime. After all, in this world, instant gratification made the world go around and money bought attention and respect. However, while the veterans of this underworld understood the risks of being locked up, I

was naïve to this part of street capitalism. I failed to store away what was called, “bail, lawyer or bag money.” I ended up sentenced to twelve years in prison convicted on drug charges.

Prison Orientation

I began my incarceration at Minnesota Correctional Facility-Saint Cloud on a forty-eight hour quarantine hold and could not leave my cell for any reason. After the door closed on me for the first time, I felt alone, fearful and hopeless. I ate, read and slept the entire time. At the end of the hold, a male nurse came by and recorded my medical history and I began orientation. I was issued my prisoner’s identification number and found out that was to be my new name. I went before the Institutional Classification and Program Review Team and received a non-programming assignment, a recommendation for Anger Management, Parenting Classes and Critical Thinking Classes. I was classified as medium-security custody and scheduled to be sent to Minnesota Correctional Facility-Faribault on the next available bus.

The wait to transfer from Saint Cloud to Faribault was an environmental study of the prison culture. This was a time full of incessant inmate stories, lies and fantasy. I tuned my ear to what is called “penitentiary talk” which consisted of make believe, innuendo, flair and flash but the common theme was narrow patterns of thought. It was like the purpose of orientation was to mold us into androids. However, in the actual prison culture, the rules of the institution were disregarded and there was a series of unwritten rules.

Men’s Life Skills Group

Once I made it to Faribault, I got close to several prisoners. They shared with me that there was a prison psychologist, Dr. Dana Houck, who conducted a group that helped them deal with issues related to other parts of their lives. I immediately made an appointment to see Dr. Houck.

The basic lesson in my story is how I transformed from a mere male to a man in prison, and my struggle to maintain this status through proper mentorship. Hillman, Meade and Some’ (1992) highlight the importance of mentorship in *Images of Initiation*. They claim that the

easiest way to end a culture is to have uninitiated males who don't love life become men. They contend that mentoring males involves watering the seed that is planted within them and setting them on their path to growth.

My mentorship was facilitated under the guidance of Dr. Dana Houck, the Prison Psychologist. When he allowed me to join his Men's Life Skills Group and saw me individually as a patient. Dr. Houck started me on a process of self-development and growth similar to going from an acorn to an oak tree. He made it clear that, ultimately, I would have to bear the majority of the responsibility for my developmental process of "individuation" and to do my "inner work." Fritz Kunkel (1984) in *Fritz Kunkel: Selected Writings* describes individuation as a process of becoming yourself and finding the work that you were placed on this earth to achieve. Individuation in a nutshell is searching for the meaning in life and is based on an inner urge to find and obtain truth and a step-by-step process diving deep into the core of the personality of the person.

The basic idea is that since everything is alive everything seeks to fulfil itself. An oak tree is an acorn that has individuated. In my process of individuation, my work included recording dreams and associations with the dreams, writing daily journals of my reactions, feelings, and intuitions about myself in connection with what I saw in the world that connected to my issues or problems, and reflections of it all. Most important were the groups that I sat in on to discuss my insights and receive support, encouragement and clarification from others also involved in the process.

Another lesson I learned during incarceration was about change. I was used to doing things the same way and change came and by taking that first step, creativity and rewards entered my life. As I began to change, I started enjoying my life. I had a strong desire to know, and I wanted answers, so I was motivated to keep moving forward even though I did not know the outcome. During the process, I read a book by Moore and Gillette (1991) *King, Warrior, Magician and Lover*, which highlighted the seven stages of initiation. In these stages, the initiate moves from Unconscious Incompetence (doesn't even realize that he is not a man), to Conscious Incompetence (realization that he is missing something), to Conscious Competence (learning) to Unconscious Competence (effortless manhood). So pre-knowledge

was a hindrance to my change process, and if I wanted to grow, I had to accept the uncertainty and unpredictability of the process.

I think that I was driven by the passion to really know myself. Once I broke through my comfort zone and embraced the part of me I had been running from, opportunity met me. My time in prison was like being in a cocoon or a monastery and the day came when it was time to leave and take a different path on the journey. I had to follow through without resistance to change. Fortunately, after doing four years on a twelve year sentence, I qualified for early release. I followed through with the inner work, hope and a path to nurturance for change and received an early release from prison in April 2002.

Academia as a Transition to Freedom

Placed on parole from 2002 to 2009, I moved to the campus of Minnesota State University and jumped into the game of academia. Shortly after entering the game and moving up the criminal justice major ladder, I found that my ladder was against an unfamiliar wall. In the criminal justice academic game, the rules are based on the scientific method, research agendas and grant procurement. The goal of the game is to conduct research that has a good chance of being funded by a government agency or a foundation. The objective is to use the research to justify legislation, policy and procedures to widen the use of incarceration through truth in sentencing, abolition of parole, and mandatory minimums (see Ross and Richard, 2003). The problem is that there are methodological weaknesses and mistaken analyses in these studies and they are only as good as the intuition of those conducting the studies. Dr. Houck (2009) sheds light on this in his book *Life Changing Lessons from Hard Core Cons.*

According to Dr. Houck, the scientific method is often ego driven and is used to prove by empirical data that cognitive therapy is superior over all other therapies. However, cognitive therapy leaves out many mysteries of life, the presence of the soul and creativity. On the other side of the coin, Dr. Houck's program (which is not based on cognitive therapy) helps men to see deeper into themselves, to change their behavior, and gives insight into old patterns of behavior and helps prisoners to understand the musings of the soul. He defines the soul as the center of human consciousness where we come to know the soul through our

human experiences of uniqueness and spiritual depth. The soul gives us the desire to create and preserve life and contains our intellectual power, ethical sensibilities, aesthetic sensibility, imagination and the unknown aspects of our personality (Houck, 2009: 4-6).

However, I found several mentors in Dean William Wagner, Dean Michael T. Fagin, Provost Scott Olsen and Provost Kirk Peterson. These are university administrators, who after learning about my story and background, still helped me to navigate academia by going against the grain of systems that buttered their bread. They believed in my potential and empowered me to set and accomplish goals and dreams I never knew possible. Most recently, Provost Kirk Peterson hired me in a tenure-track position with the possibility of bringing my perspective to his university's education program at a nearby prison in Ohio.

In 2002, I received a Master's Degree in Counseling. Additionally, in 2003, I joined the Convict Criminology Group (Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2003) and used this as part of my primary teaching pedagogy and personal philosophy. The group also helped to acclimatize me to academia and transition to free life. In 2005, I received a Multi-disciplinary Master's Degree in Sociology/Ethnic Studies and Corrections. In 2010, I moved from Minnesota to Idaho to teach at Idaho State University (ISU) and co-founded the ISU/Bannock County At-Risk Youth Partnership, "From Corrections to College. In 2011, I completed a Ph.D. in Sociology from South Dakota State University.

Convict Criminology: From Corrections to College

Receiving these degrees was all possible because Professor Stephen Richards, and the Convict Criminology sisters and brothers, taught me that I should use my voice to address the crises in the juvenile justice system. Ross and Richards' (2003: xvii-xxii) statement that "the failure of criminologists to recognize the dehumanizing conditions of the criminal justice system and the lives of those defined as criminal" motivated me to want to make a difference. When released from prison in 2002, I realized that I was part of what Arditti and McClintock (2001) refer to in *Voices* as the disadvantaged and marginalized minorities controlled by the criminal justice system (see <http://www.convictcriminology.org/voices.htm>).

I also realized that I was part of “soft-line” social control outlined in Stanley Cohen’s (1985) *Visions of Social Control*. This was where the state roots social control in community-based approaches and conventional social boundaries. From my experience in community corrections, I had an inside view and decided early in re-entry that my contribution would be to let my experience inform the design, the critique, enlightenment and contribution to meaningful programming within the “soft-line” system. Within this context, I wanted to provide individuals with strategies of empowerment to break out of the cycle of “soft-line” control, namely an education strategy. Convict Criminology has always taught me to challenge the idea that a person’s personality traits, level of self-esteem, or moral character can be determined by referral to the fact that they have been convicted of a crime or spent time in prison. Therefore, I sought to enlighten the public discourse on juvenile programs, deconstruct juvenile delinquency, re-construct intensive supervision to highlight youth development, and to give voice to the people who have the best interests of growth-oriented experiences of youth at heart.

When I arrived in Idaho, I sat down with the Bannock County Chief Probation officer, Matt Olsen and formed a partnership to effect change in the Bannock County Youth Development Center Program. We decided to provide strong educational programming, social mentoring, and opportunities to engage in pro-social activities that would connect youth to community and facilitate successful transition from juvenile corrections to higher education. We thought that Convict Criminology offered a humane and empowering approach to developing this youth program. Our partnership helped to accomplish this by recognizing the legitimacy of diverse experiences and perspectives among multiple stakeholders, including youth themselves. In other words, we gave youth a voice and encouraged their participation in the broader corrections dialogue. Using Convict Criminology as a foundation, promoted cooperation among youth, corrections, colleges and universities, and various community partners that, by working together, created new and effective programs. Through this process, “juvenile delinquency” was deconstructed and reconstructed, and intensive supervision was modified to highlight growth-oriented experiences and youth development (Burnett and Williams, 2012).

The Corrections to College program is rooted in postmodernism (Ferrell, 1998) and post-structuralism, in the sense that the participants are encouraged to think beyond the status quo cognitive-behavioral restructuring which is based on the traditional assumptions of knowledge that look at youth through a deficit lens instead of through humanistic eyes. The program sought to foster critical thinking and transformation so that new knowledge could inform new behavior. The program used a statement by Michel Foucault (1988:155) as an important guide to change, "When one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, then transformation is possible."

Since I had a practical understanding of juveniles and comprehended their lived experiences, as well as abstract knowledge of the criminal justice machinery that informs what is missing from treating juveniles, I knew that the program should employ the unique research method of giving voice to the juveniles. So I recruited students from my Idaho State University courses, trained them and paired them with the youth as mentors and tapped into their creative expression through journaling and visual ethnography. As a team, we met the juveniles on their own turf (Bannock County Idaho Youth Development Center) to observe, interact, serve, empower and to invest in the subjects' personal growth and as Richards and Ross (2001:185) wrote, "to get a little dirty by violating social distance and value-free sociology, which is committing an academic felony."

Within the education context, Convict Criminology encouraged me to reach out to and work with others the way that Steve Richards, Annette Kuhlmann, Chris Rose, Tracy Andrus, and Rick Jones and others had worked with me. They instilled a desire to improve the conditions and opportunities of others in transition toward personal growth. As reflective of this desire that was cultivated through Convict Criminology mentoring, I trained my ISU student mentors to help young adults transition from corrections to college (Burnett and Williams, 2012).

Richards et al (see 2008, 2010, 2011) depicts the Convict Criminology Perspective as a proposal of new and less costly strategies, that are more humane, and more effective approaches, for rethinking the way prisons are organized, and re-entry to the community is considered. At a time that the taxpayers are calling for tightening of governmental budgets,

the Idaho State University-Bannock County Youth Development Center partnership worked to reduce youth criminal recidivism and help youth to become productive citizens in the community. ISU students used creativity and effort to provide services to the mentees that gave them the academic skills they needed to succeed in college. The program also used Post Modern theory helped them to overcome social inequality through mentorship, which help to develop human relationships to deal with the concepts of difference. (Carrington, 1998).

The Bannock County Youth Development Center and Idaho State University have partnered for over two years now, and feedback from all stakeholders is very positive. Bannock County judges and corrections officials and YDC administrators and staff have been delighted to have help and support from ISU students and faculty. YDC strongly believes that the partnership has helped youth make therapeutic progress faster and more thoroughly. ISU students and I have thoroughly enjoyed being part of a growth process involving all partners and ourselves. For me, transformation from prisoner to professor has been fulfilling.

Observations and Conclusion

After prison, I went through a personal restoration process and committed to never selling drugs again and desisting from crime. I vowed to never return to prison and have come to terms with myself and my past. I looked at what I did, what unfolded and how I processed my experience. I admitted to selling drugs and how drugs slowly killed people and their dreams and how I had a hand in that. As part of my restoration process, I gave back to others (specifically the at-risk youth population and my students), forgave myself and followed my heart and instead worked to develop my intellect.

I realized that it is what I learned in both prison and at university that has changed my life. Today, I am just beginning my career as a university professor. I am using my voice and working to deconstruct the status quo belief system that tries to exclude at-risk youth and students from taking part in the American Dream. Discrimination and prejudice has spread its tentacles into the juvenile justice system to target youth at an early age and thwart their growth and development. Additionally, I am constantly advising and mentoring students who have been or are part of the criminal justice system and have also faced the unique

challenges and road blocks to their development because of social class and race, and their status as criminal offenders. I am a role model informing them that they too can transform their lives, the way I did.

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