

## **THE MYSTERY**

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When it comes to change, or in our present discussion desistance, why do some individuals find their path of transformation via faith while others travel a different road? As one who has been transformed by a faith journey and now works in the prison system as a chaplain it is a question that has intrigued me for some time.

When I gave talks regarding my own journey I would always begin with the opening line, “my earliest memories of life on this earth were filled with anger and confusion; anger that I didn’t understand and confusion about not finding a place to fit in the world around me. My personal descent into crime was never fuelled by some need for quick easy money. Drugs were a wonderful escape from reality and crime became a way of burning off the anger. Although many of my earlier years were caught up in very minor offences such as break and enters and theft I always seemed to evade the law, except for my drug possession offences. As my drug use increased, I moved to harder drugs. Speed (methamphetamine) became my drug of choice. Not much of a surprise for an evolving adrenaline junky.

The crime also became more intense and it was not long before I found myself along with a partner going on a crime spree that included extortion, kidnapping and finally a murder. It was the murder that produced a stab of conscience. One of the only lucid moments in my dark, destructive path occurred when I refused to be the trigger man. We broke into a place, only to discover there was someone at home. That was not in our original plan. My partner told me to kill him. I refused; sadly not on moral grounds but on principle. Our victim had done nothing to us and I saw no reason to shoot him. My partner felt differently and put a bullet in his head.

Arrest was not long in coming. Two months later I found myself facing a second degree murder charge. From my perspective life was over as I sat in a 6’ x 8’ cell facing life in prison. In Canada you can be found guilty of second degree murder if circumstances warrant and in my situation the court found me guilty. At 19 I was on the verge of committing suicide. As I

contemplated an end to my short, miserable, destructive life, a spiritual awakening began to occur and through a series of dramatic events I became a Christian.

I have always deeply appreciated Starr Daily's words of wisdom. He was a hardened criminal from the mid twentieth century who wrote about his experience of coming to faith in prison long before it was fashionable to do so. In the opening lines of his book *Release* (1942) these thoughts can be found:

"I cannot explain the mystery of it. I only know that it was an inner experience of some sort, a huge and different experience. Many men and women have sat down with me to offer their explanations. They've spoken with what seemed authority. Yet in the sober reflective hour that followed I've wondered. I've wondered if such wisdom as they possessed was not as foolishness to God."

Starr Daily goes on to describe his journey, one that had numerous struggles and personal insights. Some of which would be a stretch to fit into an orthodox template of the Christian journey. Perhaps that is why I continue to be drawn to his work. Mine has not been an orthodox journey either. Occasionally filled with experiences that were deeply mysterious, moving, transforming both within and without.

Nine years into my prison journey I was released to the community with a burning desire to serve. I completed a Bachelor of Arts degree, then a Master of Divinity degree. The transformation from criminal to pastor was not one I completed solo. In fact it was one that could only have taken shape through the encouragement and support of some very special people. They not only walked with me on the path but also spoke into the greater community when questions of credibility arose about allowing a man such as me to carry the blessing of the Church in ministry.

I began my ministry journey in a small rural pastorate caring for three small churches. For six years Linda (my wife) and I enjoyed a tough but rewarding work. By 1998 the call to go back inside was growing louder in my heart. So in the fall of 1999 I started work as a chaplain in

Atlantic Institution, a Maximum security federal facility. I worked for four years in the max, eight and half years in a medium security facility and am presently working in a minimum security facility.

In 2008 I began work on a Doctor of Ministry degree which I hope to complete by 2013. I have designed an online course for training prison chaplains through the Salvation Army College here in Winnipeg and also do a yearly training with new chaplains entering our federal prison system.

The road has not always been easy. You don't serve time in violent environments without some residual effect. Occasionally the ghosts of the past have come back to haunt me, especially as I worked through riots and suicides with both inmates and staff. One of the surprises for me has been the acceptance I have experienced. It of course took time to build credibility. And there is the occasional staff or inmate who just can't get there head wrapped around the fact that a lifer and a clergyman can be one and the same. For many though it is a doorway to talk about issues they simply would never share with anyone else. It does make a difference engaging someone in conversation who has been there.

So why do some find a path through faith and others not? I received an interesting answer to that question. When I transferred to the medium security facility I met someone whom I had served time with many years ago. He too had found a path to transformation but he declared loudly that faith was not part of his journey. His earlier experiences with the Church had left deep scars. We enjoyed a good friendship as he worked with a number of men in the Institution nearing release.

One day we were walking through the prison and I joked with him that perhaps God was a great deal closer to him than he knew. He stopped in mid stride, looked at me with a serious expression and responded, "You know the work I do. I do it because it is my way of getting things right with the guy up there". We shook hands as I replied, "I know what you mean". From time to time I have reflected on that conversation and the words of a banner that hung in one of the prison chapels I frequented, "Invoked or not God will be present".

Over my 13 years as a chaplain I have spoken with many men. Some come to deal with their conscience. Some come looking for a quick religious fix. I don't supply one. Others arrive declaring that they are not religious at all but seek my help because "I have been there." In these situations and many others, as I have journeyed with men who declare faith and those who don't, the truth carried on the banner in that prison chapel has echoed through their lives.

Starr Daily's words concerning the mystery of change have kept me humble not only about my own transformation but also that of others. As Jesus so aptly put it, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (Matthew 7:1). As I have journeyed with individuals I have discovered that sometimes those who claim faith as their agent of change give little evidence of it. And those who claim no faith in their path of transformation offer up a life filled with the actions of the deeply faithful.

We can spend much time trying to dissect the process of change. Many have and others continue to do so providing us with invaluable insights for those who are still struggling on the road of transformation and those who would help them. However, a word of caution is in order in this pursuit to unlock the process of change. It is found in the words of Starr Daily that I shared earlier, "I cannot explain the mystery of it. I only know that it was an inner experience of some sort, a huge and different experience". There is a mystery to dramatic transformational change. There is, whether we want to admit it or not, a spark of the divine, a mysterious moving of the Holy touching our lives.