

An Unconstrained Mind in a Shackled Body

Michael Fiorini

Incarceration is a collision into one of the harshest realities a person may face. All you have ever known is stripped away, the freedoms of normal life left only as scars to look back on. Getting used to a new life in prison takes a while as there are many challenges for the individual to overcome. Getting settled into what one's life will be like for the foreseeable future, prisoners are forced to contemplate different options regarding how to pass the time. Some get jobs doing menial tasks for a small fraction of minimum wage, usually less than a dollar an hour, while others better themselves by getting an education. Electing to get a job does have its benefits; prisoners are able to support themselves financially and it helps to prepare them for future employment after they have served their time. However, opting to educate yourself can be very rewarding during as well as after incarceration. Educating myself not only had transformational qualities, it will also open doors for a life beyond prison. Earning an education while in prison transformed my views and helped me to develop the willpower that will carry me through the transition to community life upon release. It is my hope that this strength will stay with me as I strive to achieve lifelong goals outside the walls the currently confine me.

One of the most transformative aspects of education has been how it shaped my time in prison. When I first came to prison I had no idea what I wanted to do with my time, but after browsing through a college brochure, I noticed there was a computer programming class available. Suddenly my outlook changed from one of hopelessness and anger for landing myself in prison to that of ambition and perseverance. Long before I was imprisoned I had taken a college course on computer programming, so I was familiar with what the class might offer. Nevertheless, I was still amazed at what was being taught – Python, C#, C++, JavaScript, and Ruby on Rails were just some of the different coding languages I could learn. Being afforded the opportunity to be back in school was a privilege and I was going to take advantage of it. After I enrolled in the programming course and experienced the classroom setting, it felt like my world transformed and I was no longer in prison, but rather in a college classroom. Though I was still confined, just getting out of my cell and spending time in the classroom made me recognize that I was doing something constructive with my life. I learned a lot and was proud of myself for putting my time to good use. My days were spent building a website using HTML, PHP and JavaScript, as well

as a desktop application created with C# and also a 2D game I crafted with GameMaker. While I certainly learned a lot about games, I learned just as much about websites and different coding languages. A year after taking the class, which I passed with an A, I earned two one-year certificates in Game Development and Game Design. Most importantly, outside of learning from books and computers, my perspective about my future and myself began to reshape; I learned that I had something significant to work toward – a future that had value.

Getting an education will also help me transition out of prison back into society upon my release by having encouraged me to focus on my end goals while facing the surrounding pressures and negativity. Drugs and fighting are constant threats in the prison environment, but education has helped me to distance myself from such activity so that I can concentrate on what is important. However, it is not always easy to avoid some of the pressures that I am faced with and I sometimes have to remind myself that I am not perfect, but I always try to do the right thing. Education teaches patience because transitioning out of prison is not instantaneous. People who have many years to serve tend to go into school with long-term goals in mind. I have aspirations that I have set out to accomplish. However, earning a degree or certificate does not happen overnight. While it was difficult adjusting to a life inside prison, it will be equally difficult transitioning to life upon release. Education has improved my confidence and self-worth, which I can lean on while adjusting to life outside of prison.

Educating myself will help set the conditions that will help me to pursue lifelong goals well after my time in prison. By choosing education over drugs and violence, I am choosing to overcome some of the common barriers that hinder reintegration. Education provides me with a solid foundation, as well as the resolve to avoid detrimental activities in prison. It will also help me to abstain from participating in illegal and harmful activities later in life and upon release. Another lifelong goal I have is to maintain close relationships with my family. Gaining an education will help make this possible. My family stood by me when I made poor choices that landed me in prison, but as they see me working hard and pursuing my education, they are proud that I am trying to better myself and stay out of trouble. Making positive decisions has been important in my efforts to stay connected with my family, whom I will be able to lean on for support and advice down the road when it comes to housing, employment and financial decisions.

Prisoners need moral support and positive advocates in their life to ensure they do not end up back in prison. Pursuing an education while incarcerated has allowed me to work toward developing greater independence, which is key to staying out of trouble while I pursue the path toward lifelong goals.

Living in prison can be challenging, especially for people who are faced with long sentences. How we overcome this challenge can determine whether we get another chance at life outside. Unfortunately, many prisoners choose other routes instead of education. Some choose employment to afford the simple luxuries that the system does not provide, while others choose gangs and violence to build a reputation and to secure protection, or drugs to mentally escape confinement. An education can transform a person with a poor upbringing and no formal education into someone who has a greater knowledge of the world around them. I am a better person today than I was when I was first incarcerated and it is because I chose to learn instead of other detrimental alternatives. In prison you have endless time to reflect upon what you have lost. Education may be the road less traveled, but it is also a gateway to creating a sense of purpose and worth. Though prison deprives you of freedom, an education can help to tear down the constraints of your own mind and awaken the drive to work toward short term and lifelong goals.

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