

I often wonder what might have become of my life had I chosen another path. I am sure that any mindful human being who has ever designed to confront his or her conscience in search of redemption as a result of even a single isolated deplorable experience has wondered the same. We do not always consider the irrevocable – especially abominable – deeds of our past, perhaps because it is easier to suppress them altogether. Some of our deeds, however, tend to haunt the psyche the more we try to suppress them from our memories, as though eerily lurking between the realm of our conscious and subconscious mind.

There is a perception that many men (and presumably women) are incarcerated with the notion that the sentence given to them serves as requital for the crime they have committed. Yet it is often the self-righteous ones who recidivate, and only very few can attain self-actualization during incarceration. Indeed, reform is neither educational (the criminalized are told continuously what to do), nor does it constitute the breaking of a spirit cloaked in despair. Rather, it embodies the desire and practice of improving one's character, morals and values, which ultimately improves one's circumstances.

The minority who comprise the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision maximum-security prisons in New York State – as my authority extends no further – are representative of the aforementioned perception. Although rehabilitation is not offered, nor reinforced collectively within the system, prisoners may choose to realize it if desired. I have heard countless “war stories”, the ignominious deeds of men, delivered with enthusiasm and reiterated with nostalgia. But I have also heard countless pleas for help, delivered with subtlety and reiterated with urgency. Perhaps the latter were given by those who confronted their conscience in search of redemption.

It is unfortunate that during the twenty-one years of my incarceration, I have seen men come and go, and come again – always with stories of the “good run” they had while in the free world. Based on the discussions I have had with some of those men, I concluded that their return to prison was not attributed to the lack of opportunity society's pariahs are often forced to contend with. Instead, their return to prison, in absence of any other logical explanation, is attributed to their being stuck in a specific era, an era where their deeds – whether good or bad – were rewarded and their conscience undisturbed.

As a realist, I question how different I am from any of these men. Am I not also in some way suspended in time, trapped within primitive confines as the world evolves? Are not my memories of the outside world in contrast to the fantastical, hopeful visions I have of my future upon returning to it? The difference is that those men failed to seek redemption, whereas I have not. For how can one be redeemed of one's past when it is the very platform upon which one's future is prognosticated?

The reality is that, with limited access to even basic technology, antiquated programs, and susceptibility to strict disciplinary measures that are physically and psychologically damaging, the penitentiary system is designed to keep prisoners in a state of stagnation to which only some conform. The detriment of those wayward souls lies within the system's failure to understand the gravity of returning unchanged to an evolving world. On the other hand, being suspended in time does not necessarily prevent one from growing. We tend to learn more from enduring years of tribulation than we do from years of content, although it is the application of our lessons learned that matters most.

Despite the fact that there is no guarantee of my freedom from incarceration, I am at least free from my haunting conscience. Granted, I will always be a convicted felon, an "offender" who squandered opportunities to explore options that make life meaningful. However, I am not defined by the poor choices that I have made, nor by what a conviction says I am, but rather by who I become and who I strive to be. Anyone defined by principles is one well defined, and perhaps anyone who finds value in humanity (other than his or her own) and progresses morally while incarcerated is redeemed.

We incarcerate the criminalized in accordance with their crimes, as a civilized society, under the protection of due process of the law and the initial presumption that one is innocent until proven guilty. Hence, guilt should not negate magnanimity, neither in regard to "offenders" nor those offended. Otherwise, our punishment is continual and our ideal of reform is only an illusion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Riley was convicted of second-degree murder and is serving twenty-five years to life in Attica. He is enrolled at Genesee Community College and facilitates volunteer programs where he attempts to change the lives of

young adults at risk of being incarcerated. David Riley can be reached at the address below:

David Riley
Attica Correctional Facility
Box 149
Attica, New York 14011-0149
USA