

“Self, you’re the one getting out?”, the escorting officer asked with more disgust than inquiry.

“Yeah”.

“Well, aren’t you fucking giddy!”

I wanted to tell him to go fuck himself, and in retrospect, I wish I would have. Officer Bowman had given me more troubles than any other officer during my bit, but after 15 years, 5 months, and 25 days I just wanted to leave as quickly as possible. The Parole Board had granted my release just 1½ hours earlier, but as long as I was on the prison grounds, I still felt like a prisoner, so I swallowed my words.

My family greeted me in the parking lot and after numerous hugs and tears. We hurriedly departed to separate vehicles, my parents in one car, and my two brothers and I in another. As soon as my brother, Luke, began driving, something felt amiss. At first, I thought it was just the fact that I had not been in a car since 1995 or that my brother was behind the wheel. Before I went away, he was eleven years old, so in a sense, I felt as if a child was chauffeuring me away from the prison. Luke and my other brother, Bryan, immediately started showing me their I-pods, MP-3 players, and cell phones, none of which I had ever seen before other than on television. We were not even a mile away from the prison when I yelled, “Pull over!”

I barely made it out of the car before leaving my last remnants of prison food on the side of the road. Afterward, we found a McDonald’s where I could get the taste of puke out of my mouth and finally fill my stomach with something other than Ramen noodles.

Once inside, I was caught off guard by the sheer number of choices to make for even the most mundane task. “Jesse, what do you want to eat? My treat”, Luke offered. I stared at the menu board bewildered, trying to calculate all the options in my head, but soon became paralyzed by the superabundance of choices. “Come on, what do you want?”, Luke persisted, while the cashier stared incessantly. There were dozens of options. How could anyone decide so quickly? The only choice I ever had to make with my meals in prison was whether I wanted Kool-aid or water.

“Just give me a vanilla ice cream cone”.

“That’s it?”, Luke asked a bit surprised.

“Yeah, that’s it”. I chose the ice cream because it was the simplest thing to order and I felt the budding of a headache from trying to calculate so much unfamiliar information so quickly.

My family took me to the Lexington Fayette Mall to shop for some clothes before driving me to Chicago. Once inside, I made a trip to the restroom. Riding in a car made me feel as if someone had grabbed a hold of my stomach and shook up its contents. Sitting on the commode, I became startled when a guy came in and began using the adjacent stall. When he sat down, his right foot was about twelve inches from mine and my first thought was of Larry “Wide Stance” Craig, the Idaho politician arrested for soliciting gay sex from an undercover police officer at an airport restroom a few years earlier. Was this man about to tap my foot with his? I had not been that close to someone while using the bathroom in many years, so I felt a little anxious. As I stood up to leave, my nervousness exploded when the toilet flushed itself. I had never heard of a self-flushing toilet. For a moment, I thought somehow this guy had reached into my stall and pushed the toilet lever. “What is this guy trying to do?”, I thought. After looking up and around, I realized there was no way he could have flushed my toilet. Fascinated, I started standing up and sitting down, standing up and sitting down, while the toilet flushed over and over (I am sure to the amusement of the other restroom occupants). After I left the stall, I proceeded to wash my hands. When I saw no handle, I figured it too must operate by some sort of sensor. I was getting the hang of things now, so I put my hands under the spout and sure enough the water began spewing out. As I washed my hands, I studied through the mirror what appeared to be some guy behind me attempting a magic trick around the bottom part of a dispenser. Next, I witnessed a paper towel shoot out and realized that the dispenser worked much the same way as the toilet and sink. I had a few drops of vomit that had splashed on my tennis shoes earlier, so I put on my best David Blaine act and copycatted the guy’s actions before me. Waving my hand magically around the dispenser, I procured a paper towel, used my newfound skills to dab it with soap and water, and bent over to wipe my shoes. As I did, the blow drier behind me turned on and started heating up my rear. Perplexed, I stood up and realized when it shut off that the blow drier also operated by sensor. Continuing, I bent down to wipe my shoes and my butt set the blow drier off again. Within the first hour of my release, I had managed to embarrass myself in a public restroom. I should have had enough sense to know to move over after the first time, but then I had not yet mastered the use of the blow dryer.

At the mall, my family was inquisitive: “Where do you want to shop?” “Where do you want to eat?” “What do you want to do?” Each question spun me in circles. I was accustomed to being told what to do, and their questions were so dizzying that for the moment I just wanted someone to take charge and guide me. It was not so much that I could not decide these things on my own, but rather that I had not been able to make many choices – let alone open-ended choices – in over 15 years and it was excruciatingly difficult to suddenly be able to do so with ease. Prison robbed me of many things, but most acutely it stripped me of the ability to make effortless decisions. What used to be day-to-day and elementary became complex algorithms that were too time-consuming and mentally exhausting to work out in my head. I looked down at my shoelaces that had come undone but my brain was so worn down by calculations that I lacked the mental stamina to tie them. I thought better of asking one of my brothers to tie them for me, knowing I would be the butt of a long line of family jokes like: “What’s wrong bro, did you forget how to tie your shoes in prison?” Rather than submit myself to such ridicule, I left my shoelaces flapping around all day.

The first year I was out, I still thought much like a prisoner. On the inside, prison rules required me to have my khaki prison uniform tucked in anytime I left my cell. Failure to abide by the rule could result in 60 days of solitary confinement. As a result, for most of the first year I kept reaching down to make sure my shirt was tucked in before leaving my apartment. An equally serious rule was the mandatory wearing of my prison ID on the upper left side of my shirt at all times. Despite my most valiant efforts, I could not shake the feeling that I was forgetting something every time I left the apartment without my ID. To get rid of that dreadful feeling of “missing something”, I decided to carry around my prison ID in my back pocket. It worked! For almost a year, I carried it around everywhere I went. Even the way I used my eating utensils was reminiscent of prison. Almost a year after my release passed before I noticed that instead of stabbing my food with the tines of my fork, I still ate as if using a plastic spork – a plastic combination of spoon and fork used in many prisons – scooping up all my food.

Sometimes innocent words evoked prison images. One afternoon while shopping at Wal-Mart, I did a double take after misreading a sign that said “intimate apparel” for “inmate apparel”. When others referred to their phone as their “cell”, I got a mental image that did not consist of a dial pad. Prison life had so affected me that over six months elapsed after my release

before I first had a dream that I was not in prison. Instead, I dreamed that I was seriously injured in a plane crash. When discussing this predicament with a friend, I was taken aback when she referred to my prison dreams as nightmares. Instinctively, I corrected her, only to quickly concede that yes, they were, in fact, nightmares. To me, they had not felt like nightmares at all. They felt normal.

I found myself constantly bungling the pronunciation of words that I knew, words which meanings I had discovered through reading every newspaper and magazine I could get my hands on for 15 years, but words I rarely heard pronounced in prison, let alone correctly. The richest prisoner dialect probably consists of one-third the intelligent words the average person hears in the free world. As a result, I once drew a blank stare from a friend when “hors d’oeuvres” came out sounding something like “whores de vors”. Another time I mentioned paying “home-age” instead of paying “homage” to the memory of a friend who had recently passed away. Then there were words that otherwise would have been familiar, but for lack of circulation in prison, I had not become accustomed to using. I would refer to navigation devices as “UPS systems”. I would get “Red Eye”, “Red Door”, and “Redbox” mixed up, sometimes using them interchangeably, and eliciting giggles from fellow Chicagoans. None of these even existed prior to my incarceration.

My post-release experiences consisted of more than just funny memories and social blunders, however. Somber moments have also accompanied my reintegration. I have been out for 22 months now, yet I still encounter triggers that take me right back to the familiarity of prison. Around a work site, for instance, when I see caution tape, I instinctively look on the ground for blood. For 15½ years, caution tape meant someone had been stabbed. Sometimes people’s faces serve as triggers. It is not uncommon for me to see a face that closely resembles an old friend from prison. If his features are convincing enough, for a fleeting moment, I feel that rush of excitement that comes from reuniting with an old friend, then just as quickly, become saddened by the realization that it can not be him. The pangs of sadness do not go away easily when it is a friend who still has another ten or more years to serve.

Even without the visual reminder, periodically, my mind still wanders to those friends in prison I left behind: *Did Torian make parole this month after 19 years? Was Mike’s request to visit his mother’s funeral approved by*

*the warden? Did Bobby and his wife manage to work out their relationship problems through letters and 15-minute phone calls?* Other times I spend hours agonizing over those who went up for parole the same day as I but were denied. Parole decisions are entirely arbitrary. By pure chance, I had a Board member who worked for the Department of Education for 32 years and, in applauding my educational endeavours, advocated for my release. Others were not so lucky. Some prisoners got serve-outs or lengthy deferments, leaving them to do 15 or more years in some cases. The sight of tears bursting from their children's eyes upon hearing such heart-wrenching news still haunts me, as does the resignation on the prisoners' faces afterward. Sometimes the images are fleeting; other times I struggle to shake them from my mind.

For 15½ years I was not allowed to be outside at night. I used to lie in bed for hours staring through a barred prison window, dreaming of enjoying the night air. Naturally, upon my release one of my favourite pastimes quickly became middle-of-the-night walks. For a good six months, I explored a different area of Chicago at night, simply because I could. Everywhere I went, however, I was hyperaware of my surroundings. I walked at all times of the night, even though I felt like someone would jump out from behind a tree or bush every second. Headrests in cars easily spooked me. I initially mistook them for people's heads and wondered what they were doing in a car at 3:00 AM with the lights off. I felt vulnerable. When it came to crossing in front of cars stopped at crosswalks, I felt the need to look the driver in the eyes to gauge his intentions before proceeding across the street. I had seen enough violence in prison to be taught that vulnerability can be dangerous and the vulnerability I felt upon my release frightened me. It was well over a year before I felt comfortable enough to walk down three flights of stairs without first locking the apartment door behind me just to check the mailbox.

Searching for a meaningful job was another challenge. For months I struggled to find anything, but I was also reluctant to lower my standards. I tutored adult basic education, as well as associate-level college courses for most of the last eight years in prison. I had hoped to continue tutoring upon release, but I soon realized with my record I would be lucky to find any kind of employment. I must have submitted a couple hundred applications within the first few months of my release, only to receive few possible leads. My lack of "real world" experience led me to many mistakes, and perhaps being

too forthcoming with prospective employers was one of them. Several times I received very positive – almost promising – vibes from hiring managers only to never hear back, despite my persistent follow-ups. I am sure it was the discovery that I had been incarcerated for over a decade and a half that gave them second thoughts. After submitting an application to Borders, I even had the manager call me off to the side during a follow-up and caution me to “change a certain answer” on my application if I wanted the job.

Perhaps naïvely, I never thought I would be faced with having to hide my incarceration to secure employment. My hesitancy with taking such a road has as much to do with practicality as principle. How can I hide something that occupies such a presence in my past? I am 36 years old and have spent all but one of my adult years behind bars. If I try to keep my incarceration a secret, I am essentially barred from linking myself to any past tense verbs. But even more importantly, I do not want to live a life with a secret past, constantly fearful of getting fired should someone discover it. Openness tastes better than secrecy at this point in my life. And again, perhaps I am naïve, but I still cling to the faith that most people believe in giving second chances.

All in all, some days I feel like a member of society, contributing my part to the community. Other days, I feel like a tourist in a foreign land. Sometimes when I share my prison experiences with others I get stuck in mid-sentence using a phrase like “where I *came* from”, and I am unsure whether I should instead say “where I *come* from”. The latter conveys the sense that I have not yet arrived and the former sometimes feels too premature to use honestly. “Arriving” is not something that occurred in an instant. I did not feel like a free man the moment the handcuffs were removed and the metal door clanged shut behind me. In fact, taking my first step on free soil was not much different than any other step I had taken in the previous 15½ years. The prison shackles were removed from my ankles, but I still wore the fetters of mental imprisonment. I swallowed my words to Officer Bowman more for fear of authority than wanting to leave quickly, even though he no longer had authority over me. Thus, for me, freedom was – and continues to be – a gradual process. Only a slow shedding of my prison habits and mind-set will enable me to feel like I am free. Like I belong.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Jesse J. Self* was 19 years old and a *much different* person, when he went on a two-week robbery spree in Kentucky. Caught up in a small draconian town during pre-election times, he was sentenced to 70 years in prison. Jesse served 15½ years of the sentence before being granted parole and released on September 21, 2010. After two years of freedom, glimmers of hope are peaking through the horizon. In May 2013, he graduated *summa cum laude* from Northeastern Illinois University, a double major in Interdisciplinary Studies and Social Work. Jesse recently started working for the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR), and next year – if all continues well – he will begin advanced standing graduate studies at the University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration. His hope is that writing will continue to give him new insights as he moves forward and that it will take him places far removed from the dank prison cells where he has spent most of my adult years. He can be reached by email at [jesse.self720@gmail.com](mailto:jesse.self720@gmail.com).