

Beating the System

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Very few of us do not think about beating the system. After all, whether we deserve it or not, the system deprives us of the freedom we cherish. It stands for all that we resent: lack of choice, restricted movement, denial of access to loved ones. We resent the walls, the bars, uniforms, being told what to do, what range we must live on, what programs we must take.

Moralists will argue that we get exactly what we deserve. In fact, many citizens believe that we are treated too well; the myth is steak every day, colour TV in every cell, pampering by high priced baby-sitters. Few of us can argue that we didn't know what we were getting into when we made the bad choices that landed us in prison. None of us arrived by accident, and if we are honest with ourselves, we'll acknowledge a whole series of destructive behaviours that preceded our committal to a 'monastery of the damned.'

To be blunt, we are considered by society to be 'turds in a cesspool.' We may assume that the public is concerned about the general welfare of prisoners or that the Constitution protects our civil liberties, but such illusions are shallow. We have merely become the currency for a professional class 'living off the avails' of crime. It is time to wake up to the reality that 'crime pays' only for those people who depend upon our folly: judges, police officers, attorneys, law clerks, guards, and psychologists.

Don't get hood-winked by 'do-gooders' for change. Those few crusaders who seek abolition and reform are zealots in a lost cause. The community is not in the mood to entertain liberal reform in corrections. Indeed, the average citizen would likely support the reintroduction of banishment to penal colonies. We are the rejects of a socio-economic system without compassion or pity. Neighbourhoods reject halfway houses; communities refuse individual parolees. As sick of "doin' time" as we may be, the real world may be even harsher.

No one is tough enough to survive the impact of negative labels and community prejudice, or we wouldn't be returning to prison in droves, as recidivists. No one is immune to the low self-esteem we bear because of shame, alienation, and inadequate skills for coping successfully in society.

In view our of status and chances of success upon release, the future doesn't look particularly bright. It's 'damn' depressing to have to accept our collective reality. We neither deserve nor can expect any public empathy. Hope exists but we must claim it for ourselves. Hope is found in beating the system, the smart way.

The smart way is not the path many of us have continually taken: defiance, conflict with the 'man,' doing time in the hole to prove something that nobody really understands or respects anyway. Investing energy in destructive behaviour only destroys the individual. The 'cystem' will survive unscathed long after we are faded memories and forgotten numbers. Destructive behaviours have not changed the reality of prisons. We are still prisoners. The system still controls the keys.

The smart way to beat the system, is to accept reality and devise a strategy for dealing with it. Such a commitment requires both an individual and collective decision. It's a decision that must be made, not only in our heads, but in our guts – behind our belly buttons where the 'demons' of our fears reside. The decision is simple, but the implications are profound. To beat the system, we need only to decide to treat ourselves with the respect and dignity that every human deserves. We need to decide individually that 'we are worth investing personal effort in!'

AA members are familiar with the slogan 'I can only change myself, not others.' It is a simple truth, but hard to accept. It is always easier to project blame for our inadequacies onto others. But until we come to terms with our individual reality, separate the crime from the man, and decide that the 'I am' is capable of much more than what the label implies – we're doomed to fail.

'So, how do I invest in myself in this hell-hole?' you ask. The first step is to consider a sentence as an 'opportunity,' instead of just a burden to be endured. Opportunities for education and training exist behind 'the wall,' but the greatest barrier to their effectiveness is our attitude, not the quality of resources. Education and training are the best and most enduring experiences we can extract from the system. Knowledge and skill are ours for life. No one can rob us of our ability to think, understand, and solve problems. Education and training provide the passports to genuine freedom. Education and training ensure that in a competitively tough market-place, we will have a niche where we can fit in. Education and training allow us to see ourselves as 'winners' instead of perpetual losers. Education and training build a self-esteem that says: 'I am worthwhile; I can contribute; I can do things well.'

You groan cynically. 'The school is a joke. I tried that bullshit and didn't learn a thing.' If that is the way you view it, undoubtedly you didn't. You are certainly entitled to continue enjoying the turd's delight of swimming in the cesspool. Without much effort, you'll have a guaranteed address and income for life. You'll never have to worry about being responsible for yourself, having a home of your own, finding your next meal, or having to cope in the real world. Don't be surprised, however, when Joe Public rejects and scorns you – not because you're an ex-con – but because you didn't have the wherewithal to treat yourself with respect, when you had the chance.

As a former employer and having had extensive experience with employers, I know that our past is not nearly as big a problem as our present. Every employer is looking for good help. The president of a major company used to say, 'I don't care if you're from Yale or jail, I just want to know you can do the job.' Doing the job requires that we are not only literate and skilled, but that we can think logically to solve problems. The modern workplace needs people who can adapt and change to meet the needs of new technology; people who are used to learning.

Individually and collectively we can create and demand a positive learning environment, and we can demand the most from the system. Administration uses education statistics to create the illusion of massive programming. It is up to us to demand the delivery. Enroll in courses. Develop the thirst to learn. Ask for help from peer tutors. Avail yourself of every possible opportunity, then demand more. You'll be amazed by what you can accomplish!

An education is the ultimate form of restorative justice. The entire population benefits when just one con becomes literate. Pride is contagious. Educated cons have reason to lift their heads in self-assurance. We are better able to articulate our needs, better able to negotiate collectively, better able to see a future for ourselves. Whether the 'man' wants to acknowledge it or not, educated prisoners demand his respect.

Adult education and training at every level, whether basic literacy, high school, college, or university are vital. The positive skills we learn in prison can't be taken away from us at the gate. Education is the ultimate way to beat the system.