

Changing Directions

Darris Drake Jr

As I stare at my door which rarely opens, the reality of solitary confinement weighs heavily upon my shoulders. Is this rehabilitation? There are days when I do not hear my own voice and, as days pass, I find myself more frequently answering my own mental contemplations. Without a strong mind, one can easily tumble into a mental crisis. That is a regular occurrence around here, evident by the screams of desperation, followed by the frantic kicks and punches which rattle the same doors at which I am staring. The unbudging steel fuelling the flames of helplessness, charring their resolve.

Somehow this environment is not alien to me. It is by far not the highlight of my existence, rather it has become a minor inconvenience. Writing those last two words was not easy – to say that the loss of my freedom is a minor convenience exposes my institutionalization. I have spent a lifetime in cells just like this one and, when I was free, the desperation was still present. After the life I lived, immersed in the criminal subculture, things like desperation, violence, drug addiction, resentment, greed, and death became my social norms. To experience anything outside of that was alien.

I have never valued societal norms or felt included in normative society, so my transition to the subculture was a seamless one. I think most people mistakenly assume that everyone knows and understands the societal norms, and should therefore abide by them. However, when you are not provided the stability to develop your own values and a platform to pursue them, then societal norms become chains of oppression. I always felt that society was impressing its will upon me, and as a child I had no way to express this feeling, so I rebelled. As an adolescent, anytime I felt an authority (whether institutional or parental), I began to fight that noose and thrash against it.

That feeling of helplessness was the source of my anger. Not knowing how to fight it, I began to physically impose my will, whether on my peers or anyone in whom I perceived weakness. I used aggression to hide the scared, insecure child I really was. I have harmed a lot of people running from those feelings of helplessness, some of whom I love.

Two years ago, I made the decision to change my life. Deep down, I did not believe it was possible. My experiences caused me to develop a low sense of self-worth. I began to educate myself and take some painful trips down memory lane to find the root causes of my behaviour. Learning how to heal from the inside-out has been a priceless tool on my journey. Though there are still times, such as this, where my intellect does not apply and my

aggression is still waiting in the background. It is a process, of which I will always have to be aware.

I am in the process of getting an associate's degree in Human Services and would like to get a bachelor's degree in Criminology. My purpose is to learn what caused my criminal behaviour and help kids so that they do not have to struggle the same way I have. I am serving 236 months for first degree assault. If I can help kids find themselves before they experience this, I will be fulfilled.

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