

CHAPTER I

Doing Time

*“There’s no better time to realize that you’re not a failure in life.
You’ve just been delayed.”*

— Victor

REGARDLESS OF WHAT you have done or how long you have been or will be in prison, you’re not a failure unless failure is what you accept for yourself. In fact, it’s impossible to be a failure if you use your time well.

If you’ve been in for awhile you know there are many ways to use your time well — continuing your education on your own; if a program is available, working toward a GED or college degree; participating in group counseling; attending groups like AA or NA; participating in job skills training; volunteering in programs like those for the elderly or youth-at-risk that the prison may offer the community; or getting involved with a prison ministry. You can work on developing and maintaining positive family ties and nurturing positive friendships. You can be a good friend to fellow inmates. By practicing stress-reducing techniques like relaxation and meditation you can support your emotional and spiritual well-being. You can also expand your knowledge and self-understanding by reading certain books and articles. You probably know of others. The essence of all time well spent is that it helps you experience the peace, dignity, and positive potential of your own true nature.

One of the greatest dangers that confronts any prisoner is not

using time in prison consciously and, as a result, getting used by it. That amounts to finding oneself six months, or five years, or twenty years later with an inner life that repeats over and over and over with the same old craving, anxiety, hostility, anger, and self-doubt. By using your time well you break out of this inner prison. You learn how to “do” your time. You make the most of it. As one inmate wrote, “Time is precious. Learn how to do your time. Don’t let time run you. Stop. Listen. Hear the knock. If you can’t hear it then turn the radio or T.V. off.”

I have met many inmates who felt that nothing short of being in prison would have been dramatic enough to break the cycle of thinking and acting that robbed them of a chance at really living — of experiencing any real peace, inner power and freedom. Ironically, in a place where the freedom and power to make a hundred practical decisions a day is routinely stripped away, you *can* discover the true meaning of freedom and power. No matter what is going on around you, you can experience some control over your own destiny. You can experience a power and freedom that *cannot* be taken away.

Joe Before incarceration I was living my life like a lot of the men in failing communities. I was living on a day-to-day basis. Hustling, stealing and carrying on in a life without a cause or purpose. No world existed outside of the environment where I lived. There were no hopes of a better future. There were no great memories of yesterday. There was only living, with “survival of the fittest” as the everyday mentality. How was I to change at this stage in my life? I found it extremely difficult. In fact, I believed that I couldn’t change. I was just another human being that had been used to living the lifestyle that so many in my community had been living. I had no idea of there ever being alternatives that I could choose from. The only thing I seemed to care about was keeping my macho image and fitting in. I thought my life would end up the same as many others that I’ve known — dead or in prison.

I now look at those times as one chapter closing in my life and a new chapter beginning. Because I was taken from my environment that I had been so accustomed to, I was forced to face change. I resisted change as much as I possibly could, and resistance brought nothing but exhaustion and misery. Change was all I had left and I decided not to let my life end at that point. When I became more open-minded, a whole new world opened up right before my eyes. What I came to find out was that you are capable of change and personal healing no matter how bad off you think you are.

Crisis to Opportunity

The English word “crisis” means “a time of great danger or trouble.” The Chinese word for “crisis” means both “danger *and* opportunity,” a different and more hopeful perspective.

Going to prison is a crisis for most everyone. It is often the outer manifestation of months, years, or even a lifetime of inner turmoil and crisis. It is most often the outer manifestation of confinement in an inner prison of fear, powerlessness, hopelessness, guilt, shame, anger, and low self-esteem.

The men and women who participated in the Emotional Awareness/Emotional Healing course are no exceptions:

Bob’s father was an alcoholic. He put Bob down every chance he got. His mother, who was terrified of his father, never protected him. Bob went into the Army and served one year in Vietnam. When he returned, he got a job with the telephone company. Despite a life that looked fine from the outside, Bob felt down and depressed. “To ease the pain and boredom,” as he said, he started doing cocaine. To support his increasing habit, he got involved in selling. He was arrested, tried, and given ten years.

Jim’s father left when he was two years old. He didn’t hear from him again until he was twelve. His young mother was left to raise

four boys on her own. Until he was fourteen, James managed to do pretty well in school. He was good-looking and well liked. At fifteen he joined a gang and stopped listening to his mother. At seventeen he became a father. At seventeen he killed a girlfriend's old boyfriend because he didn't like what the guy was saying. He's in with a life sentence.

Raul's parents were both alcoholics. His father left when he was five. His mother couldn't handle the responsibility of parenting. He and his sister were separated and put into foster homes. He lived with four different families. Starting at age six, he was sexually abused by a foster mother and father. The abuse stopped when he was taken out of that home at age nine. At age fourteen, he started sexually abusing children who were six to nine years old. At twenty-two he was arrested for sexually abusing children in his neighborhood. He's in for nine years.

Steve and his two sisters were raised by both parents. His parents were cold and controlling. There was little love or affection in the family. He did really well in school and went to college for a few years. He dropped out and started to work his way up in a major corporation. He became obsessed with having more money and living in the fast lane. It was the only thing that made him feel "good". He embezzled over \$300,000 from company accounts. He's now doing three to five years.

Cindy was raised by her grandmother. She was sexually abused by her uncle from age eight to thirteen. At sixteen she became a drug addict and a prostitute. By nineteen she had a daughter of her own. She moved from one abusive relationship to another. At twenty, Cindy was arrested for selling crack cocaine. She's in for twelve years. She's now HIV-positive.

Crisis becomes so woven into the fabric of many peoples lives that by the time they reach adulthood, crisis is sometimes all they have known. Many seek relief from this reality through drugs and

alcohol, further clouding the picture. Statistics indicate that 66% of people entering prison are alcohol or drug abusers. Every addict's life is in perpetual crisis. There is no balance. No rest. No clear perspective.

But crisis, no matter how bad it is, can be an opportunity, a positive turning point in the course of one's life.

Time in prison can be, in its own very strange way, a gift. Incarceration offers an opportunity to step back from "life as usual" — to be sober and face life directly, to re-evaluate, to learn, to heal. Even if you have been in jail for many years and prison life is "life as usual" for you, the opportunity for growth and change is always there. In this seemingly most unlikely place of incarceration, a place where degradation and fear are ordinary, there is a unique opportunity to be lifted up, to be empowered, and to find peace.

Victor I never had time to get to know me until I was locked away alone with myself. Grace brought me to prison to be free of the self imposed prison I had myself locked away in all those years.

Still, not everyone is ready for inner healing. No one can make another person ready. Have you ever given advice to someone and they just weren't ready to hear it? Or have you ever been offered good advice you now wished you had listened to? Readiness comes in its own time, if at all. Perhaps you've heard the expression, "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink." A horse will only drink when it's thirsty. If there is some small thirst, some openness to change and growth, as I assume there is since you picked up this book, your environment need not stop you.

It is said that "life is like a stonemill. It will either polish you up or grind you down." Which your life will do is ultimately up to you. When you use your time as an opportunity to grow emotionally and spiritually, you are polished up. You are strengthened. You can increasingly feel good about who you are, what you have to offer,

and the direction of your life — even if you are in prison — even if you're never going to get out.

Joe I know being in jail or prison seems like the end of the road to most of us. But that's just not true. It can be the beginning of a new start.