

Master Discipline, Expect Nothing

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Suggestions for making progress despite long-term imprisonment.

When I was 23, in 1987, I began serving this 45-year sentence. I was convicted by a jury for having led a group of people who distributed cocaine. There were no weapons or acts of violence in the case or in my history. Nevertheless, Judge Jack Tanner thought a tough sentence appropriate, despite my not having served a single day in confinement before my arrest on these charges related to my leading a Continuing Criminal Enterprise.

Now I am 16 years into this sentence. At 39, I'm a lot more experienced at setting goals and overcoming obstacles than I was when I hobbled through the sallyport of USP Atlanta. Back then I didn't know anything about imprisonment. With a significant amount of time ahead of me, and knowing the potential for stabbings and murder was only a holler away, I recognized that life inside the 40-foot walls could have been the last stop for me. Now, of course, I realize that much life remains, and that one key to growth through imprisonment is discipline. It's a virtue I continually strive to master, and such a strategy is one I recommend to my fellow 2,000,000 prisoners.

During these times of impending war, we prisoners can learn much about discipline from soldiers. George Washington wrote that discipline is the soul of an army. In his letter of instructions to the captains of the Virginia regiments, Washington wrote that discipline makes small numbers formidable, procures success to the weak, and esteem to all.

As prisoners, our lives are in some way like the lives of soldiers who live under the control of others, and separated from loved ones. Like soldiers who use discipline to make themselves stronger and enhance their sense of self, we as prisoners can use discipline to help us achieve personal goals, the obstacles wrought by confinement notwithstanding.

Upon my arrest, my life descended from oceanfront penthouses to cellblocks permeated with a constant head-splitting clamor. I assessed my predicament and knew that the years ahead would not pass without struggle. I had been alive for only 23 years, so it wasn't easy to contemplate the decades my sentence would require me to serve. All I knew was that I wanted to make the most of my time, and that I could not allow prison administrators or other prisoners to limit the progress I needed to make. At that time I didn't know whether I would ever leave prison, but I know that if I wanted release to come, I would need to discipline myself and become independent in order to conquer the challenges ahead.

Both the U.S. Congress and prison administrators have made it difficult for prisoners to educate themselves beyond the GED. Through discipline and persistence, however, I was able to generate support outside of prison walls, and that support opened opportunities to begin and complete both undergraduate and graduate academic degrees at accredited universities. I learned that even in prison, the pen is mightier than the sword (or a shank). Other prisoners can educate themselves, too, if they're willing to confront the hindrances along the way.

The Department of Justice proclaims that the Bureau of Prisons encourages inmates "to develop the skills necessary to become productive members of society upon release from prison." I have not found this much evidence of that BOP encouragement during the years that I have served. At least not formally. Although a prisoner can be convicted of infinite infractions to make time more difficult, there is no accomplishment a prisoner can make to enhance his status formally; the custody and classification manual does not distinguish the graduate student from the Jerry Springer fan.

My experience admonishes me to expect interference and impediments every day of my life. It's a struggle. As a disciplined prisoner, like a soldier, I have learned that it is imperative to detach myself from what is not in my power to control. Only through that detachment, can I

grow and prosper in spite of the rigidity of this system. And through that detachment a prisoner can attain an inward freedom, which brings with it an inner peace.

Prisoners should expect administrators to provide food, clothing, and shelter. They should not expect much else. They should not expect to eat the food they would like; they should not expect comfortable clothing; and they should not expect cozy living quarters. Sometimes the food will be better than other times, but as prisoners, they should not expect the delight of a well-prepared meal. Accept it. Move on. Prisoners will not know the satisfaction of wearing a good suit, but they will be issued clothing. Prisoners should not feel entitled to a particular bed, or even a particular prison, because administrators can and will move us as if we were chattel.

When prisoners learn to live without expectations, they remove the power of others to disappoint or frustrate them. As prisoners, there will always be more disappointment and frustration to come. That is one fact every prisoner can count upon.

It is the responsibility of all prisoners to determine how they will respond to the inevitable frustrations of confinement. During my term, I have been jammed by petty bureaucrats and prisoners alike. Some guards have held my mail to impede my progress, and some prisoners have challenged my sang-froid. As a disciplined prisoner, it's been my responsibility to consider all options available in my response, and to understand the ramifications that would follow my actions. A tenacious focus on goals served as my compass to help me navigate my way through the labyrinth of confinement.

When prisoners control their minds and their perceptions, they give themselves the power to control their progress. Discipline helps them move forward toward their own goals, not for the meaningless accolades and certificates issued by bureaucrats, but for reasons that have personal meaning for the individual engaged in the struggle of imprisonment. Focus, discipline, and commitment to one's own goals diminish the power of others to frustrate and disappoint.

The prison system is punitive rather than encouraging. Expect it. Despite the progress of enlightened management, this system governs through the use of punishments and eschews incentive. This war on terror will make matters more onerous for prisoners, so I urge them to emulate soldiers and master discipline. As we incorporate discipline into our nature, and banish hope and expectations that anything inside these communities of coercion and deprivation exist to help us, we enable ourselves to achieve.

When we acknowledge that we are who we are today because of the choices we made yesterday, and that we will become what we want tomorrow because of the choices we made today, when we accept that we alone are responsible for our success or our failures, we transcend these American gulags, these wastelands of human spirit. Like Washington's soldiers, successful prisoners make discipline the soul of their adjustment.