

WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY EXPERIENCE: CRIME, PRISON AND THE RESULTANT SEQUELAE

There are a myriad of lessons one can learn from first-hand experience within the criminal justice system. How you decide to glean information specific to you for your situation is paramount to your experience. The prison (or warehouse) system in this country (at least the Feds) would like to believe that the lessons learned from peoples' time inside makes them more ready for re-entry into society, but the reality is far less bright. I was in prison long enough to see several people return after release, and realized that what I pick up along this path will definitely determine how I come out of this predicament. This is in no way a 'how to' guide, but I will try to express a few key lessons learned from my endeavor.

Most of what I learned about not committing crimes happened in the year that passed between my arrest and the beginning of my incarceration. In that year, I lost professional and personal relationships from my actions (and the ensuing news coverage), and learned that there is really no 'easy way out.' The fact that I was able to resolve all my (then current) financial issues after the arrest led me to the realization that I could have essentially solved my problem(s) without having done anything to get me arrested in the first place. That one still stings a bit, but in general, the slow steady march of time (like a doomsday countdown) until an eventual incarceration was not at all anything I would like to repeat.

A few years ago, soon after my release, I came up with three key lessons (and their sub-headings) I had thought of from this experience and sat my daughter down and explained them:

Rule #1: Nobody Cares. Or, What is important to you is never as important to anyone else.

This one usually gets parents in a tizzy because they like to think that they care about anything and everything their child cares about. But, if that were true, then they would never tell them 'no.' [We'll save the whole parents-lack-of-discipline-these-days conversation for another time.] For example, if your child wants a pony, it's probably not as important to the parent that the child gets a pony. In 2014 Tim Urban wrote an article called "Taming the Mammoth" which essentially says the same thing and is an interesting, if not sardonic, read.

In prison, there are several layers of people not caring, from the individual prisoner all the way up to the Warden. On a prisoner level, you simply cannot get tied up in other peoples' problems and issues. Everyone has a story to tell inside, and you pretty much tell people whatever you want them to know, or believe. But you need to be careful of what you take in from others, because you are who you tell others you are, unless it can be proven otherwise. On the flip side of that is the 'do your own time' approach; or stay out of other people's business. In the public world it may be ok to butt into others' conversations in a public setting, but inside it can get you hurt. So you need to not care about what goes on around you, unless it involves you directly. It can be a challenge to keep to yourself when you walk into a room and everyone is laughing. You want to ask "what're you laughing about?" as a way to be involved, but you shouldn't.

The hard part of people not caring is that it's a two way street. When you're not in front of someone all the time, you lose your place in their consciousness. People can easily grow apart when they're separated by bars and can only communicate by phone, email, or an occasional visit. Prisoners can easily fall into the trap of thinking that the person they left will be the same person when they get out. But that's rarely the case, and it's not realistic to think that people won't grow or develop while apart.

Above the prisoner level of not caring is the administration. Whether they are guards, counselors, case managers, unit managers, admins, medical staff, lieutenants, the Captain, or the Warden, they're only interested in the problem-free running of their institution and really don't care about the individuals inside. Any problems or crap they have to deal with runs steadily downhill to the puddle of inmates at the bottom. Even the employed psychologists are only there for the smooth running of the institution. They're there to do their job, and the prisoners are there to serve their time. Above the Warden, there are upper layers of the Bureau of Prisons and the Courts, and petitions can be filed at all levels, which leads us to the next rule...

Rule #2: You've got nothing coming to you that you haven't earned.

This one is nearly self-explanatory. From a prisoner standpoint, since you're confined and have very limited resources, they have the Administrative Remedy process. You can request nearly anything from any staff member if you do it on paper, but unless there's a program statement that says you can have what you're asking for, it's not going to happen. This Remedy program, upon each denial, can be escalated to the next level as described in the previous paragraph. You can even argue your point in front of a judge, but most requests are denied (and can be outlandish), and the courts are full of useless, dead-end petitions from prisoners that think they deserve something different. They could be right, but see Rule #1.

Rule #2 really hits home once you hit home. The life, people, lifestyle, and salaries you knew before your federally funded vacation may all become elusive. You can't start where you left off, and you have work to do. Knowing that, it becomes mentally easier to get back into the thick of things; assuming this is possible. Statistically, many relationships fail *after* a prisoner gets home, since people are different X number of years later.

This rule helps keep your expectations firmly rooted in reality as you realize that all your work lies ahead of you. No one is going to save you from your responsibilities and you're probably not going to get a presidential pardon. Even with regard to my DOPL probation, applying for re-licensure wasn't enough. There were supervision, meeting attendance, and reporting requirements necessary to earn the right to return to practice.

Rule #3: You're no better than anyone else.

My biggest eye-opener on the inside was the stark difference there can be between intelligence and education. Coming from a more academic background, I would, not so much look down my nose at those with less education than me (*I am* a doctor, after all!), but, at least, think of myself

as somehow better for my educational achievements. Since the criminal justice system is known as “great equalizer”, I soon realized that someone’s education had little to no bearing on what could best be described as the quality of an individual. I met some men who hadn’t been to school since they were 12, but could grasp complex concepts many times faster than many professional colleagues I had known throughout the years.

When you’re inside, Rule #3 can be both a hindrance and a help. It is a hindrance because when someone in prison breaks the rules, usually the entire unit or prison suffers. Prisons are well versed in punishing the many for the actions of the few. For example, during an altercation, one inmate, in an act of vengeance, microwaved sugar water and threw it into another inmate’s face. This resulted in all microwaves being taken away for 2 months. It can be a help in that when you see inmates leaving at the end of your sentence, you know that your time to leave will eventually come. Everyone’s treated the same, regardless of their charges. Once you’ve done your time, you get out.

In general, not prejudging people has helped me improve my empathy. I don’t know what someone else is going through, nor do I know what past events have led them to the point where I’ve observed them. All I know is that they’re probably doing the best they can with what they’ve been dealt. Systemically, on the positive side, the healthcare system in this country treats everyone the same. The example I gave my daughter regarding Rule #3 was that if she and Taylor Swift both went to the hospital with the same condition, they would receive the same treatment.

As nice as it is to think that my experience can be neatly bundled into three rules, the reality is that the punishment of the criminal justice system extends far beyond the prison sentence. The halfway house system is set up in a way to make any reintegration a choppy mess. They fail to follow Rule #3 and treat all their residents exactly the same, regardless of their crime, background, behavior, or living situation. To a degree, this makes sense, but their system is not set up to evolve with the resident throughout the time (usually about 6 months, max) that he is transitioning back into the real world.

Once you’re done with the halfway house, then comes probation. Their approach was in stark contrast to the halfway house in that they *did* evolve their approach to the individual. I really have no complaints about how my case was handled, as I was handed off to case manager that, because of my situation, used more of a hands-off approach. This time passed quickly, and I was able to petition the judge in my case to cut my federal probation off nearly 18 months early.

Until I decided to re-apply for my license, I was applying for jobs in the private and public sector. The next round of punishment came in the form of either missing out on opportunities due to my background (I had one job offer rescinded after a background check) or having to explain my work history and the gaping 4-year hole in my work history. The reactions from interviewers ranged from sympathy to disgust. I tailored my applications toward positions that didn’t require a background investigation, and had been employed by the State for nearly 3 years in a position

that didn't require a background check before I reapplied for licensure. But now, the State has decided to implement a state-wide background check requirement for all employees (at least in the Health Department). So, at this time, I'm waiting for my Program's turn to be checked to see what fresh hell this will unleash.

In the meantime, because I know these rules, I have reconstructed my life in a way that will keep this downward spiral from every happening again: I have a more open communication process with my support system (wife, supervisor, family, etc.) and pay more attention to my stress levels and mental health states. As an employee chiropractor, I don't actually own my business, and therefore don't have the same, or even similar, stresses that I had before which led me to make the bad decision(s) I made. I have brought my personal debt (much of which came from this situation) down considerably and will have it paid off within 3 years. This way, as the last 6 years had demonstrated, I can stay free from potentially problematic situations that could lead to bad decisions and their consequences.

So, in summary, what I've learned, aside from the Rules, is that there will continue to be punishment for decades after the crime (I'm going on my 12th year since my arrest). Whether it's the occasional reminder of your past with every new job application, or an out-of-the-blue essay requirement outside the Memorandum of Understanding of supervision for re-licensure, the hits will keep coming, until, apparently, they stop. When that happens is anyone's guess.