

TRULINCS 23038076 - LUMMUS, ALLAN CRAIG - Unit: BAS-H-A

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FROM: 23038076  
TO: Lummus, FL  
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Taking Personal Responsibility

MP #32

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Taking Personal Responsibility

One area of my recovery that I see clear evidence of improvement is taking responsibility for my life. The pre-prison me was always in victim mode. Oh my life was bad because of x,y,z and this person and that person. My life with R was bad because of him, my work was not fulfilling because of it, my marriage was not working because of C. I refused to take control of my own life. John O'Donohue has a beautiful phrase that captures my psychological state. I was "seduced by the practice of self absence." I am sure at some point in the past...perhaps as an infant this abdication of responsibility might have been protective, but the protection from without soon became a prison for me shortly after I started to crawl.

This practice of self-absence pervaded my very being. I allowed others to initiate and end everything from conversations to relationships. I was the passive recipient of interpersonal human activity. The exception was in the world of the mind: religion, politics, education, arts and at work. The formal distance allowed for safe expression within clear limits.

With R, it took me seven years of trying to leave an abusive relationship before I actually succeeded in escaping. I refused to take the responsibility to end the situation that I understood was detrimental to me. I placed his need to stay connected above my own need for self preservation. With C, my own feelings of emptiness and longing were projected on her. Our marriage was hollow because of her actions, not mine. I refused to see how my activity helped to form the basis of the reality I found wanting and limiting.

This process of denial is everywhere around me. Many prisoners spend all their time complaining about their lawyers, judges, prosecutors, FBI agents, spouses, jobs. I hear very little critical self analysis. What did I do to contribute to my prison sentence. Even those who are trying to heal by seeking therapy, seem to focus on their parents and their childhood. It is very tiresome.

In contrast 12-step, humanist, and Buddhist thinking strongly focuses on personal agency. We need to take our actions and behaviors seriously. In taking them seriously, how did what we do contribute to where we are and who we have become. Then how can we change what we do to create the changed conditions we want to live in.

The core Buddhist teachings are do what is good for you, don't do what is bad for you, and clarify your mind. So I have spent a lot of time working on what behaviors contributed to my crisis. Some of them were lack of mindful awareness and lack of intimate connection. By closing off human connection, I created the very conditions that I feared. By not practicing bringing my mind back to the life that I am living, I lost myself in endless distraction.

So I have addressed both of these needs/sufferings. By practicing daily mindful meditation, I am pulling myself back from the drive to distract my mind from the real world. By consciously choosing friends I can be intimate emotionally, I am creating the conditions of meeting the human need for belonging/connection. By taking responsibility for creating the conditions of mindfulness and human intimacy, I am experiencing a reduction in suffering, increase in true human happiness, and healing my heart.

