

Mindfully Incarcerated

By Daniel Labbe

Wayfinders: A New Kind of Support Group

Many of us who live in prison struggle with deep emotional wounds and mental health issues that severely twisted our ability to live healthy productive lives. This is no excuse for the behaviors that landed us in prison - it's just a hard fact for the majority of the Prison Population. This being the case it stands to reason that if these issues are not effectively addressed those who are released from prison will likely return within a few short years creating much suffering for themselves and others along the way.

As it is, the current model of "Corrections" in America goes something like this: Take a person whose mental and emotional wounds are severe enough that he (or she) acts out in socially unacceptable ways and warehouse that person in a hostile, corrupt, and alien environment totally cut-off from the community. Then, after many years, release that person back into the community without supports and expect him to lead a healthy life. Does anyone actually believe this is a good idea? If so, please refer yourself to your local Psychiatrist.

While we're waiting for our culture to let go of its outdated and ineffective version of justice - one based on Vengeance and counter-violence - there is something we (inmates) can do to counter the effects of the poisonous environments we're warehoused in. More than that, there is something we can do to heal the wounds that twisted us up to begin with and to empower ourselves to lead healthier, more

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rewarding lives, I know because, despite the odds, this is exactly what I've been able to do. Today my life is about sharing ~~the~~ my experience and the knowledge and skills that have given me back my life.

For most of my life I have struggled with deep mental and emotional anguish. Anger, grief, desperation, anxiety, and loneliness became my normal leaving me emotionally unstable and ^{with} a huge chip on my shoulder. I was desperate to escape this pain, but I didn't have the skills or knowledge to address my issues. I self-medicated with drugs and alcohol. I tried therapy, rehabs, medications, and religion, but nothing "worked." Eventually I got so twisted up that I made the selfish and desperate choices that landed me in prison causing ineffable pain and suffering to others, as well as myself, and especially to those I love the most.

After coming to prison it only got worse. All the pain I had struggled with ~~before~~ suddenly exploded. Violence, shame, ~~and~~ hatred, hopelessness, depression, grief — they assailed me like an army straight out of hell. Again, I tried to "fix" my problems. Therapy, meds, religion — you name it — and I tried hard, over and over again. Eventually it became too much and I made a serious attempt at my life. This attempt landed me in the infamous Bridgewater State Hospital — a mental health facility for inmates (BSH was recently investigated due to multiple incidents of abuse and a recent murder of a patient by corrections officers (The investigation found BSH unfit to give mental health care, but nothing has been done about it)). In all, this was

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my fifth trip there - and my last.

While locked up in an empty cell, with nothing but a paper johnny on, I came to a critical realization: There was nothing I could do to fix or escape my pain. No pill, no person, no therapy - nothing, not even suicide - would make it go away. If I did kill myself I believe I would just be born into a life circumstance that would present me with the same problems. So I had two choices: I could continue to fight my pain, ^{try to} escape it, resist it and be pulled through it kicking and screaming and prolonging it, or I could stand up, face it, and walk through it with some purpose and dignity. Either way, I was going to experience it - all of it.

Healing, I realized, was not about "fixing" the pain, the problems, but about learning how to fully experience ~~at~~ them, to live in healthy relationship to them, and in this process allowing the pain to work out its own natural process.

With this mind-set I began exploring different ways of being with my emotions and thoughts rather than try to fix or escape them.

That was the first breakthrough. The second came a few months later after reading Viktor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning and Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Successful People. The breakthrough was this: My experience of any situation and what it means to my life relies more on how I choose to respond to it than it does on the actual situation itself. I can't control what happens or how others behave so focusing my attention on blaming these

Sources made me powerless, but by shifting my focus on to something I can control, my response, I empowered myself. I can always choose a response that supports my goals and values and by doing this I create a healthier, more rewarding reality for myself. I always thought that circumstances had the bigger say in how I experienced life - whether or not things went my way, people treated me fairly, or treated me badly, but this isn't the case. How we choose to respond (how we interpret the situation, how we engage it, and with what goal) radically alters our experience of it, what it means to us, and how it will play into the future. This was a mind-blowing discovery for me. The best part was that I always ^{have} ~~had~~ this power. This is true freedom and personal empowerment and no person, circumstance, or institution can take this freedom from any ~~one~~ of us, unless we choose to give it away.

Rather than react to situations based on my wounded emotions, distorted thoughts, or impulses I can choose a response that supports my goals and values and reflects the best of who I am. Really, this is powerful stuff.

After this breakthrough I dove into the work of healing and growth with ravenous zeal. It was like my ^{heart} ~~and~~ was waiting for this moment all my life (or, possibly, lifetimes). The skill that has helped me make the most of this process, and truly internalize what I was learning, was Mindfulness. Meditation and mindfulness practices have been the key ingredient in allowing me to make the most of my freedom to choose and carrying out the work of healing.

Think of how this would apply in the moment - it is truly transformational!

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and truly taking responsibility for my life. The greatest gift of mindfulness has been the realization that I am already whole and complete just as I am, and that the core of who I am is, and always has and will be, a "good" person. This is true for all of us and realizing this is nothing short of the greatest Home-coming ~~is~~ imaginable and a great freedom.

Today I continue the journey of healing and lead a far healthier and happier life, and I am dedicated to sharing my experience and the knowledge and skills of mindfulness based models with others who can benefit from ~~it~~ them.

Recently I have put together a 10-12 week course that teaches the core of what I've found most powerful and healing in my journey. In a few weeks I will be offering this course to other inmates here at the Massachusetts Treatment Center (Pending staff approval, which looks good so far). The course subjects include -

Mindfulness and meditation - What are they? Why bother?

Self-Discovery - Healing, wholeness, and Basic Goodness

True Freedom and Empowerment - Your freedom to choose

Emotional Tolerance - Holding your seat

Rational Thinking - Recognizing distorted thought patterns and reframing

Compassion - Empathy and self-compassion

Kindness - The key to Happiness

Putting it all Together - Creating your own practice

My hope is that this course will provide the necessary skills and knowledge for anyone with a sincere desire

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to change his or her life for the better ~~to~~ to do so effectively. After my release I would like to offer this course as part of a new kind of open-ended support group for anyone who struggles with mental, emotional, or addiction issues. ~~This~~ This group, that I'm now calling Wayfinders, Wayfinders will have a prison component so inmates can begin their journey in prison, and continue it after release with community support would combine the best aspects of traditional 12-Step support groups with what I've found to be most effective about Mindfulness-based and self-help programs. Unlike other mindfulness courses that last for short periods, Wayfinders will be open-ended allowing members to support each other in their journey for as long as is necessary, and as a non-profit organization it will be free to gain opening these skills and knowledge to a segment of society that truly needs them. There is no way of knowing, but I wonder if such a group was available before I came to prison, maybe I could have saved myself and those I hurt a lot of unnecessary pain and suffering. If Wayfinders can help someone else ~~escape~~ from following the same road I went down then maybe something good can come out of this journey.

Please
Share this post with any media outlets or foundations who may be interested as well

I will keep you posted on the progress of the course as it progresses here and how other inmates are responding to it. If you have any questions or comments please feel free to share them (and thank you everyone who ~~has~~ has supported me with recent comments).

If you know of anyone who may be interested in what I'm doing here, please share this post with them. Let's start something truly transformational. Peace!