

Terrell's First Year Reflection

After serving more than 16 years in prison, I began my journey of true freedom in September of 2015. My freedom, however, feels like more than a release from prison. It is something that I don't think I'll ever be able to adequately articulate. I didn't know what to expect upon release. I'd listened to what people had to say and I knew enough to expect both internal and external challenges.

I remember walking into the halfway house where I was going to live for the next eight months, feeling invincible and vulnerable at the same time. The invincibility came from having survived the worst of times, and the vulnerability, from being new to the changes that had occurred during my incarceration. My views were mostly formed through my assumptions and the experiences of others, so I knew I couldn't completely rely on them. Some would hold true, and others would not.

One of the greatest misconceptions I had concerned the halfway house. This was an important step for me as I transitioned. I expected the halfway house to be as it was billed; a tool that would assist my transition. What I encountered was the total opposite. Instead of assistance, I was met with resistance by the unprofessional staff and overall incompetency of the organization. At first I didn't allow it to affect me, and then it seemed to become a recurring and unwarranted theme.

I had problems at least twice a week concerning my passes to get in and out of the halfway house. I was ordered to stay back from work for frivolous reasons such as quarterly reports and delayed approval of passes. Though I was doing everything that was expected of me and more, I was still running into problems with the staff, as were many others. They seemed to relish in the fact that our freedom was in their hands to an extent so they constantly antagonized the residents and sent guys back to prison. The staff didn't do anything that would immediately threaten my freedom, however they found ways to poke and prod that began to penetrate my peace of mind. It was during those times that I recalled all I'd been through while working towards my freedom.

The issues with the halfway house allowed me to hone my anger management skills and remind myself to stay humble and focused. Yes, I had moments of absolute frustration...and handling my frustration effectively had to do with my constant reminders of where I had come from. I can understand how someone would want to put the past behind them and forget about prison, but I found that it was important to not only remember that past, but to keep it at the forefront of my mind. Though the halfway house was a challenge, it was nothing compared to the alternative: going back!

The second greatest challenge was relationships. People expected more from me than I was capable of giving before anchoring myself. I also had unrealistic expectations from relationships. Being married I walked into a bundle of expectations right away. Though my wife had been by my side since the very first day of my incarceration, her understanding was limited to her role. I was finally home and we could move forward with our lives. I wish it could have been simple, but it was really complicated initially. Family and friends that I interacted with also had expectations. They didn't consider that I was starting my life again at 37 years old; even those who had experienced incarceration. The transition process must be adjusted to by all parties involved and I had only considered this minimally before my release.

The pressure that I put on myself was intense enough without the pressure of managing old relationships and building new ones. I didn't know how to communicate this without hurting those I love, so I found myself keeping most of my frustrations inside. It seemed like everyone expected me to simply be grateful for my release and engage in a never-ending celebration. There was simply too much work to be done. It was a lot more complicated than any of us understood. I eventually found that being open and honest about my internal struggles made the greatest difference.

The greatest challenge of building new relationships was sharing my past. I've grown into a better human being because of it, but it's not as simple as telling someone this. Yes, your actions can show proof of change, but the stigma associated with incarceration is prevalent, and once you put it out there, there's no taking it back. Some people just can't see beyond it. However, some of my more sound relationships were formed upon my release. I didn't allow these people or anyone else to define me. Regardless of what a person thought I was, I exhibited my true character, the "new" me and this helped some to see beyond my past. For those who didn't, it is because they had scripted me into a narrative that existed long before they'd met me. I set a standard and made my decisions accordingly.

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The journey isn't always easy, but I can honestly say that I've found my groove. Much of the discipline I exhibited while in prison would prove to be priceless. Building my character has paid the greatest dividends seeing me through the toughest of times. My only complaint is that there are not enough hours in the day. I work at Fair Shake full-time and attend college full-time. I love work and I enjoy being back in school and the hustle and bustle of it all. Balancing it all has come with its sacrifices, but none are greater than the rewards that have come because of those sacrifices. I understand that what I do with my time dictates what my time will do for me.

The overall process has so many moving parts that if I didn't have the strength to find balance within, I would have been thrown off my square on several occasions. It is the practical things that I did while in prison that have gotten me through. The habits that serve me most when the chips are down are my dedication to maintaining an effective attitude and strong character, and a willingness to accept things as they are while discovering effective ways to turn them into what I want and need them to be. The acceptance includes an understanding that there is always room for growth. Trust me, even if you think that you have it all in order, you will still encounter situations that will prove you still have plenty of room for growth.

I've come to appreciate freedom as a responsibility. I have ripped holes in the fabric of society and now I understand my responsibility to mend them. My actions affect not only me, but those who have been grouped in with me. I will be forever associated with the incarcerated community, for better or worse. If I fail it is a failure that will, in some way, reflect on those who are currently or formerly incarcerated. My responsibility comes in showing that we're not what the media portrays, and that we are capable of change. I am reminded of this every time someone finds out that I'm formerly incarcerated. I'll usually get a look of surprise and a comment such as "you don't look like you've ever been to prison." It is a reminder that I am on the path to changing the views of others as I navigate my process. This is just as important to me as my own freedom. I know many who have gotten raw deals because of past mistakes. Some of whom may never see the light of day despite their brilliance or potential to contribute to society. I don't want my potential influence to be lost in my own struggles or shortcomings.

I have a new appreciation for life, though I am not without flaws and I'm not always in the best of moods. My appreciation for my freedom and understanding of the responsibility that I own is something that carries me through. Had someone told me early in my sentence that I should consider my impact on others while a door is being slammed in my face, my response would have been less than civil. Now I have a new lease on life and those doors remind me that I could have been sitting in prison with a life sentence. Instead, I am a trailblazer on a mission that many have forsaken. This provides me with a sense of purpose and awareness that I doubt I would've encountered without my experiences. My mind is open to endless possibilities as my heart is warmed by those who continuously reach their hands out to me in assistance. Those people remind me that their willingness to assist and embrace me is not pity, but a result of my efforts to help myself and others.

As I enter the next phase of my transition I refuse to focus on the struggles that will surely come or the accomplishments from this past year. I will continue to move forward with relentless resolve, perseverance,

strength, discipline, and honor. Probation and Parole may have its limits but my heart and mind knows none when it comes to making the most of this opportunity and the responsibility of freedom. I've left the chains, bars, and pessimism behind the walls. I brought the best of me from a place where most believe nothing good goes into or comes out of. I will not be denied. I am looking forward to having you join me. We can make the greatest difference in views and policies surrounding incarceration. Do your best in there; I will continue to do my best out here.

Ubuntu!