

"The Search To Be Someone"

Non-Fiction

By James Daly

I am 58 years old and have spent pretty close to four decades in prison. Since the age of 18 I have less than two years in the free world. I have now been incarcerated for nearly 30 consecutive years, twenty-four years of which I spent in a super-max setting, and have only a sliver of hope that one day I may be granted my freedom.

My story is a cautionary tale to those boys and young men, who like myself at a young age, struggled to fit in, felt misunderstood and sought attention in all the wrong ways. For me, I sought attention early on by acting out in school, cutting class, and then committing crimes and sought to find myself through drug use and eventually gangs. In short, I allowed my insecurities to spiral my life out of control and left a very wide path of destruction in my wake. In one way or another, everyone I came in contact with I hurt to some degree. Worst of all, I allowed my own senseless behavior cost me almost any chance of ever living a normal happy life in the free world.

I hope this will also be a tale of how I was finally able to find myself. It took visiting some very dark places, both literally and figuratively, before I could see the person I had become and want so much more for myself. I wanted so much more out of life than the concrete walls and steel bars that surround me. Hopefully by sharing my story it will make a difference in someone else's life.

After spending nearly the entire 1980's in and out of prison, in 1990 while out on parole I began robbing banks and various commercial businesses. And when the police tried to arrest me I had an 11 hour shoot-out with them before being taken into custody. Some how throughout that 11 hours neither I nor any police officers were injured. Nevertheless, as a result of my actions I received four consecutive life sentences plus 38 years in state prison to run consecutive to a 32 year federal prison term I had received for bank robberies. In short, I believed that I had no hope of ever getting out of prison and life as I knew it had forever changed.

Following my sentencing I was immediately flown to USP-Marion, Illinois which was then the most secure prison in the country. And then in 1995 most of us at USP-Marion were air lifted by way of Con Air to Florence, Colorado ("ADX") where the Federal Bureau of Prisons was opening up a state of the art prison built specifically to limit prisoners ability to have contact and to communicate with each other. The goal was to isolate. ADX in some circles became known as "The Alcatraz of the Rockies." These two prisons were where the Federal Government sent the worst of the worst of their prisoners. At these prisons prisoners like Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols (Oklahoma City Bombers), John Gotti and Nicky Scarfo (Italian Crime Bosses) and El Chapo (Mexican Drug Cartel Leader) may very well find themselves next to an international terrorist or prison gang leader. Here everyone learned quickly that they are no one special and all were expected to carry themselves like a convict.

While in both prisons we were locked down 22 hours a day the differences between the two could not be more stark. USP-Marion was

an older prison which had been converted into a super-max prison in 1983 following the murders of two prison guards on the same day. So as a result, although we were locked in our cells for 22 hours a day we were still able to communicate with each other through the bars, pass messages and other items on lines, and when released for our two hours of recreation it was with the 17 other prisoners on the tier. This permitted us to talk and work out together, or as was the case some times it could become incredibly violent.

It was here at USP-Marion where I came to the realization that prison would now be my life. I had somehow found myself in a prison where everyone was someone. The leadership of the most powerful gangs were here and I admired the power and respect they commanded from the rest of the prison population. Early on I decided if prison was going to be my life then I was determined to make myself known. I became completely disconnected from my family emotionally and set out to gain status, reputation and to earn the respect and acceptance from those around me. And among this group of prisoners respect was earned through demonstrating force and violence. By showing a willingness to sacrifice everything to further the gangs objectives. In my search for reputation and status I not only did what was expected of me but tried to do it in such a way that people would talk about it later. There were times I was scared at what may happen next, even believing that I may very well die that day, but was willing to suppress those emotions in my pursuit "to be someone."

In short, USP-Marion was where I made my bones. It was there that I joined a very well known and powerful prison gang, the Aryan Brotherhood. For me gang life was all about acceptance, loyalty and the feeling that I was apart of something bigger than myself. The power was intoxicating. I was now someone. I was apart of an exclusive brotherhood.

But ADX Florence was another beast altogether. It was constructed with complete isolation in mind. To limit the communication and contact prisoners could have with each other and with the outside world. What always stood out to me was the deafening silence of the place. It was eerie. Whether it was while under escort down the long hallways or even within the unit itself if the officers escorting you were not talking to each other then the only sound you heard were their foot steps and the sound of the chains of your leg irons scraping on the floor. As prisoners never left their cells without leg irons and belly chains on. The place could be like a tomb. And upon our arrival there a real feeling of helplessness set in.

The months, years and in some cases decades of experiencing the isolation that ADX imposed had a way of breaking some. Just try to imagine what it would be like for you to spend years or even decades confined to a room no larger than your average walk in closet or bathroom. I assure you that it can be very challenging. I have witnessed men that I had known for years become just broken shells of the men they once were. Some committed/attempted suicide, others started cutting on themselves or in some other way mutilating their bodies, others began talking to themselves or otherwise fell off into an abyss. It was a struggle for everyone and some made it, while others did not.

I was confined in the Federal Bureau of Prisons for 27 years twenty-four of which I spent locked down 22 hours a day at USP-Marion or in Florence, Colorado ("ADX"). During those years I visited some of the darkest recesses of my mind. The isolation imposed in these places, especially at ADX, has a way of breaking you down psychologically.

Over the years I experienced a wide range of emotions. There were times when I personally considered suicide as a viable option to escape the loneliness and helplessness that you experience. At other times I found it difficult to control how rediculously emotional I would get over things I would see on T.V. I can recall once where I completely broke down crying over some cute commercial on T.V.

Somewhere in all of that darkness I began to look at myself in the mirror and didn't like the person I had become. One thing for certain spending years in a cell with no one but yourself you get to know yourself real well. And for better or worse the years of isolation will change you.

We all have pivotal moments in our lives and it's what we do with them that can often change the trajectory of our lives. For me that pivotal moment occurred in that cell. I don't know for sure whether it was one of those emotional moments I experienced in my cell while watching T.V. Or, whether it was the growth of my relationships with my daughters, who by this time were grown women. I suppose it was likely a combination of the two. But whatever it was something got me to start looking back over my life. How I had left such a wide path of destruction in my wake. So many innocent people I hurt.

One person that still stands out most to me is one particular robbery victim. I was robbing a hair salon in Escondido, California and this young woman just completely broke down. So terrified that she could hardly move and could not stop crying. I simply wanted the money so I did all that I could to calm her so that I could achieve that objective, and was gone as soon as I accomplished that goal. After my arrest I was initially charged with this robbery but this young woman was so traumatized by the event that she refused to testify and the charges were later dropped. So ironically, it was a robbery that I was never even convicted of that 15 or so years later began to haunt me. I just could not, and still can't, get it out of my mind what I did to that young woman. Now I realize that that could have been one of my daughters. To this day I truely wish there were some way I could make amends to this woman - and to my other victims as well. But realistically, just based upon how traumatized she was, I can't imagine that she would ever want to hear from me and I can understand that.

But it was thoughts of this victim all of those years later that was my pivotal moment. Her haunting images started me down a path that had me re-evaluating my whole life. Thinking of all the victims I left in my path just left me with a very strong desire to want better of myself.

I also began to take a step back and evaluate my life and experiences with the Aryan Brotherhood and recognized that in my pursuit to "be someone" I slowly began to compromise my values, principles and began to accept things taking place around me that I never would have approved of before. What it once stood for no longer existed. Now it was nothing more than a group of bullies

preying on other white prisoners simply because they can. No one, including other groups on the yard, have the respect for them that they all once had.

Because of my gang affiliations and the things I did in support of the Aryan Brotherhood I spent 24 years locked down. I was only allowed out of my cell for two hours a day and had limited contact and communication with others. I was allowed two 15 minute phone calls a month and visiting was strictly non-contact and behind a glass partition. My youngest daughter was born six months after my arrest in 1990 but because of my gang activity and actions over the years it was not until she was 26 years old that I first got to hold her in my arms. Only now, sitting alone in my cell, I realize that it has all been for nothing. I have destroyed my whole life trying to be someone that I am not.

I was ready and desperate to hold my daughters in my arms. At some level it is just human nature to desire some sort of human contact, an emotional connection with someone else, and the desire to love and be loved by someone. To feel as though your life has some meaning. That your life actually matters to someone else. The twenty-four years I spent confined to a cell for 22 hours a day was completely void of these basic human emotions. For so long I had just been existing in a small box alone, lonely and forgotten by the rest of the world. I guess I had just reached the point where I simply wanted to join humanity again.

A good friend recently wrote me something that will forever affect how I will live my life. He said, ...

The life you lead is the life you leave. Think about the mark you leave on this earth: Is it a life worth reading about, or merely fine? Fine is fine, but when I die, I don't want people to have to make up nice things to say about me. I want to be remembered as a person who helped and a person who cared. Most importantly I want to be happy.

Live your life the way you want to be remembered. Your future starts now. The secret to life is you.

-Ray Adornette

I had not been happy for a very long time. I was not a good person and was certainly never someone that my daughters could look up to and be proud of. What my friend there shared with me only put into words what I had discovered about myself in that cell years ago. I wasn't happy with who I had become and wanted and expected more out of myself. I would like nothing more in this world than the ability to completely re-write my story. Obviously, I can't undue the pain and destruction I left in my path, but it's my hope to at least be able to write an honorable and meaningful ending to the story of my life. To be able to leave behind a positive mark on this earth. And just maybe when I die my kids won't have to make up good things to say about me, but will be able to proudly talk about how I turned my life around and made a significant difference in the lives of other people.

I am certainly not perfect and consider myself still very much a work in progress. But isn't that life? Aren't we always learning and growing? I think that I will always carry with me some of the emotional scars I experienced during the years of isolation at ADX but even with those scars I am confident that I will never go back to being the person I once was.

**"To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning
in the suffering." - Nietzsche**

I have found my meaning. And I have discovered that I have always been "someone." Now it is up to me to show others who I am.

"Walking Alone"

Poem

By James Daly

Months, years and decades
slowly pass by in isolation.
Cold and alone within the concrete
walls and steel bars of a cell.
Walking Alone...

Day in and day out your mind in conflict
silently screaming at the boredom, loneliness
and helplessness of that cell.
Pride and determination is all that
stops you from breaking.
From within the strength is found to continue on.
Walking Alone...

Lost and your mind adrift
you meet your demons and visit
the darkest recesses of your mind.
As the keeper of your own secrets you
begin to examine the wrongs you have done.
Walking Alone...

Void of all human emotion and
desperate for even minimal human contact
Overwhelmed by a deep emotional
desire to simply love and be loved.
This life of existence is no longer enough.
Walking Alone...

Out of the darkness comes light.
Hope, redemption and amends is the desire.
Happiness and a meaningful life I seek
can only come from within, thus
I must continue down this path... Walking Alone.