

Episode Five: Put a Little More Air in His Balloon

Cameron: You know, I say I brought the worst out in people, and when I really noticed that, that was a terrible feeling. I was talking to this guy and he was talking about his kids, he's talking about getting out soon, he's talking about all these super positive things, right? I'm listening to him talking and I'm like, "Yeah, cool, cool man. That's awesome."

This is Cameron. During much of his time inside, he was a well-known member of a prison crew that was commonly involved in violence.

Cameron: Well, then, he finds out a little bit more about me right? And then he puts on that mask and starts saying what he thinks is going to impress me. Things he thinks that I want to hear. And he's talking about negativity, he's talking about who he hates, and this system and, you know, these guys on the tiers, these other races, this and that. And I realized, this guy was on some positive stuff, and then because of who I am, I literally brought out the worst in him. Like all of the worst, I brought out. And that was just a terrible feeling. And that's when I decided that all this negativity, all this hatred and stuff I've spread is like -- that's not good for me, that's not good for the community, that's not good for my loved ones, that's not good for this guy next to me, you know. I gotta do something different.

So, what did it mean for Cameron to do something different? Well, as we learned in episode three, Cameron grew to love philosophy, particularly the moral questions it can pose.

Cameron: I felt the gravity of being a moral agent and actually making these choices and not just going down what I normally did. So, the initial and the hardest part, I think, was just doing it differently, you know, choosing something differently. Asking myself, "What is the right thing to do here?" Asking yourself constantly, "What is the right thing to do?", I think is inevitably going to lead to helping others. Because you're gonna be given the chance, and when you ask yourself, "What's the right thing to do?", you're going to help others.

Herbert: So, but your own sense of internal satisfaction from helping others, how did that develop or when did you first start noticing, "Oh this feels good"?

Cameron: I mean I've always been a very social person, you know, relationships always mean a lot to me. So people that I've been close to, I've always been important in helping. But after I decided to start doing things differently, I started going on a more wide scale and I just found satisfaction in it. Helping to facilitate others' journey was just meaningful, it felt good.

So far in this series, we've considered why many prisoners feel compelled to begin to walk on a path toward atonement, and why that journey can be difficult. In the closed and masculine world of prison, emotional exploration and healing can be hard to accomplish.

But if a prisoner is trying to make amends, what kind of person do they want to become? What do they see as the best way to respond to their past mistakes? And how is helping others an essential part of their atonement?

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This is "Making Amends." I'm Steve Herbert. I used a rare degree of access to the Oregon State Penitentiary to explore how many prisoners deal with the past and how they search for a way to atone.

In this episode, we'll explore something common about prisoners who embrace personal change – a strong desire to serve others. Like Cameron, those seek to make amends are very aware of their past harms. Because of this, the journey toward atonement means trying to make good, to do what they can to improve their communities.

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Steve: The way I grew up, nobody had any skills. We didn't have any access to that, so nobody knew how to be a welder, nothing like that. We knew how to do a burglary or rob a bank. That was kind of what we're up to instead. Like, you know, we're all poor, we're all homeless, we have no money, and let's do it this way. But I think if these changes I'm making are kind of -- I always try to encourage different people to learn stuff and then I try to learn stuff myself, so I can, so I can walk that walk.

This is Steve. He's like other prisoners who seek to atone – he's trying to be of help to others. Because he's incarcerated, the easiest to try and make good is by working with his younger peers.

Steve: I think a lot of helping people in here is therapy. There's a guy right now, I just walked past him, he's in a GED class down there, and that's 'cause I told him he had to. I talked him into it anyhow. I try to make these little programs instead of just like the old, old stuff we used to do. Try to get my friends in the metal shop. I got four or five friends that I kind of lured up into these classes up here, trying to get their degree. So the guys that I know that I feel like are smart enough and could do that, a lot of times I'll sit down and I help them write their essays or I talk them into it, to get into their Pell Grant stuff, you know. It just seems like if they end up walking out of here and they stay out of here and have a good life after this, then, I dunno, to me it means that I could have done the same thing. So I take pride in watching them walk out of here good.

Terrence takes a similar pride in the work that he does.

Terrence: Another older guy, he built this mentorship program and he was leaving the prison. He was going home, and he just threw it in my lap, like, "Here. You're the only one that I can think of that's going to be able to run with this." So, it's just an opportunity for me to have these guys to come in and kind of give back what was given to me.

Most programs in prison are overseen by either prison staff or outside volunteers. Terrence's class is different.

Terrence: It was the only program in DOC in Oregon that was led by an inmate. So, the program pretty much got tossed in my lap. So, the first thing we speak about is the type of person you were before you came to prison. What were the type of influences that you had? How was your childhood? How was your home life? What were you doing for work? Then towards the middle we start to speak about who are we now, what path are we going down. Are we going down a path that's going to be healthy for us and our future? Are we

going down a path that's going to continue to bring us back in here? And the third thing we speak about is our future. So, we're worthy of a future. But if we don't believe that we're worthy of a future, then therefore we don't see a future. So, I kind of help them to comprehend that, help them to kind of understand, okay, well you guys think about the kind of man you want to be when you get out of here. So, we talk about those type of things and what not, trying to put a plan and stuff together. So, everything that was given to me, I want to give to them.

By focusing his fellow prisoners on the future, Terrence is trying to help them to redirect their energies in the present.

Terrence: Like, hey, it's nice for you guys to be here with your buddies and hanging out and playing basketball and smoking weed and fighting and all the rest of that stuff. Ok, yeah that might be fun, but you guys need to take this opportunity while you're in here to learn something about yourself, because you are worthy of a future. And it's a lot of young guys like that, some guys listen, some guys don't. And I've just been fortunate enough that I had some good dudes around me, and I learned some things and understood some things. So let me give you guys what I got.

Cameron's work on the prison's mental health unit is particularly important in shaping how he's grown.

Cameron: Prison is so cliquey, you know. This is my people, this is my in-group, everybody else is, you know, I don't talk to them, I don't do nothing with them. So trying to stop that otherness you know, that's a big thing in empathy, I think. But specifically like this, this job I got in the mental health area, that's increasing my empathy greatly on a daily basis, you know. When they're freaking out and screaming and yelling at 3 o'clock in the morning and stuff. And there's no empathy for these guys when they're, when they're screaming and keeping you up at night right? But then being down there and just experiencing them and talking to them and just seeing them for the people that they are is just, the empathy just grows immediately and you see that otherness goes away.

This tendency for prisoners who seek to atone by doing good works is not unusual. It is a key component of what the criminologist Shadd Maruna describes as "Making Good." In his book with that title, Professor Maruna, who's at Queens University in Belfast, argues that many prisoners try to write a new story about themselves, one that emphasizes their capacity to be a force for good. In this way, they are illustrating the practice of what the psychologist Erik Erickson called generativity. This concept captures the process through which we become more concerned with the needs of others. According to Professor Maruna, as we move into adulthood, we can be generative or we can falter.

Maruna: You either figure out how to do generativity or you stagnate as a kind of perpetual adolescent, as a sort of a, you know, hanging on to being a young adult when you should have moved on to that next stage. So for many of us, generativity, performing generativity, is about becoming parents and all the processes, mystical and magical, that are involved in that. Creating these other humans that become more important to you than yourself. But even those who, many of us who don't have children, perform generativity in that kind of movement from being a player to being a coach, from being a student to being a teacher,

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being a mentee to being a mentor. You know, it's that process of, bizarrely we don't have other words for, generativity isn't a word that we use in common conversations. But it's trying to capture that very, very common process that we see in adulthood.

As Theron notes in class one morning, as we practice generativity, we redefine who we are.

Theron: So, when I reach a young cat, and I see what my words done for them and impacted them and got them on a path, it gives me that sense of positive responsibility. Because I've been responsible as a leader, but with the negative impact, like, "Come on, let's mount up, let's do this." So the times that I do reach people with positivity, it makes me feel good. That these people, these youngsters, are looking up to us as an example, but a positive example that is attacking or challenging the values and the norms that we grew up with and been conditioned to, that are not really healthy for us. So I think reaching them is very powerful. It gives me a sense of power within myself.

As Theron pointed out later in the conversation, this is a different self-conception from the one he had when he was younger.

Theron: When you're committing crime, you're taking. So it's like you're perpetuating a generation of harm and violence or crime and what not. And if you're focusing on the positive aspects, you're saying "I'm gonna try to do something differently. And I'm channeling my worth into something positive and productive." Then it gives you a sense of worth. It gives you a sense of value back to the community that you harmed.

Cameron: I think it also has to do with accountability. Like, you're accountable to that younger generation when you care. So it's almost like everything you do is based on how they're going to perceive it. And like you become a criminal by perpetually doing criminal acts. You become a productive citizen by perpetually doing productive things. So, when you have the youngsters looking at you, you have to consistently do productive things to show them this is what you're supposed to do. And then you inevitably become that thing.

Theron: So it's the reverse of what we're doing criminally.

Cameron: Yup.

One of the striking aspects of the class that I taught was the consistent manner in which the men sought to support each other as they tried to make good. One of my quieter students, Jonathan, explained one morning why that mattered to him.

Jonathan: It's just like the simple things, like this dude right here, Anthony. He don't really know, but he's impacted my life to the fullest. Of just being focused on what you wanna go get and focused on what you need. And he probably didn't even know that he's doing that on a day to day basis with me, you know, until now. Just simple things like that. Him helping me out with my wedding and him helping me out with marital problems or whatever I'm going through. That has changed my whole marriage and my relationship with my wife. But he didn't know that one little thing that he told me, "Hey bro, you gotta listen all the time. Just listen. You don't even gotta talk sometimes, just listen." I always thought, I gotta say

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this, I gotta be a leader of this. But now I just listen, “Oh, okay baby.” You know what I mean? He gave me that. That created a better bond with me and her and so now we’re gonna give that to our kids when we have kids. Just listen, you know.

Herbert: So I’m just curious Anthony, how do you feel hearing Jonathan say that?

Anthony: It just reinforces, and this is what I was gathering my thoughts about when everybody was talking, like doing those type of things reinforces in yourself that you’re doing the right thing. And so it’s an added fuel. Hearing it and seeing it, just adds fuel. Okay, this is why. This is why I’m doing this. So, it’s good.

Terrence: I mean, I think that Anthony showing love and teaching, that’s what he’s supposed to do. I mean we have a bunch of youngsters in here that are hard-headed, don’t want to listen. And then we have some that their mind is open, they want to soak up all the information and everything else. And when we do run across their paths or what not, you’re pretty much obligated to, “Hey listen. Here’s the right way to do this.” You know what I mean? I made my mistakes and everything else, but I want you to do better than I did.”

Herbert: You used the word obligation. Why do you understand it as an obligation?

Terrence: I’m obligated to do my best to teach the things that I’ve learned in here, to pass down my wisdom and everything else. I mean, it’s just like when we see individuals leaving and going home, and whatever, in my mind I’m like, “Man, be well. Take your time, be patient. Be smart. You’re leaving with pretty much the whole institution’s hopes and dreams of what they can’t go after. You have the opportunity to do that.” You know what I mean? “Don’t come back. Don’t come back.” Give him the encouragement that he might need. Put a little more air in his balloon, because he might need it. You’re obligated to do that. This is not the place we’re supposed to be in.

Theron: We see the guys that need some type of education, some type of wisdom, some type of insight. We feel obligated when we can see this, because we know a lot of the times. And what we don’t know, we go to our mentors. But if we are the mentors, then we’re obligated to mentor. So I just think that the obligation is a sense of responsibility to prevent harm.

Cameron: For me, I’ve talked about it before, how at a certain point I realized I was bringing nothing but negativity in everyone around me and then I just didn’t like the way that felt. So I wanted to do the opposite. So that’s where my obligation comes. And I think why we feel that obligation is hard to articulate, but it’s just something human in us that we feel this obligation toward others. It’s something that is just uniquely human, I think. We understand this place is miserable, right. So if we want to breed positivity and we want to help people, we’ve got to go where people need help. That’s where the pain is happening, so that’s where we have to go. Why we feel that obligation, I’m not sure. I think it’s just something that humans feel.

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Terrence: I think also it's kinda, you want better for yourself. When you start to want better for yourself, you start to want better for the next person. And it's, I don't know, for me that's how it works.

Anthony: Part of why I feel obligated is because I understand what exposure did to me. So growing up, I was exposed to a certain type of lifestyle, certain type of environment, and that's what I did. And once I started to be exposed to other things, my mind started thinking different, because it broadened. And so understanding that -- there's a lot of people, old and young, that I know that haven't been exposed to certain things. So if I don't say something, if I don't put my hands into the fire, then they may never get exposed to it. So that creates a sense of obligation in me.

What is striking about generativity as a concept, according to the psychologist Dan McAdams, is how closely it is attached to the notion of redemption. Professor McAdams, who's on the faculty at Northwestern University, has studied the stories that people tell about themselves. He notes that people who are generative also tell a story of themselves that emphasizes redemption – how it is that they are able to turn negative experiences into positive lessons.

Dan McAdams: I'm not sure which causes which, but there does seem to be a way in which these two things, generativity and redemptive stories, go together. I think they tend to go together in part, psychologically speaking, because redemptive stories support generativity. I mean, generativity is difficult, and more often than not, when you engage in generative activity of one kind or another -- be it in parenting or teaching or civic involvement -- you're gonna run into a lot of obstacles and you're probably going to fail, maybe more often than not. But if your story tells you that, "Hey, look at your life. You've gone through lots of bad things in the past." But look at that story and you see that in many cases you overcame those adversities or at least those adversities gave way to positive outcomes. If your story tells you that about yourself, then I think that helps you to sustain a generative commitment to life.

In class one morning, Anthony made much the same point.

Anthony: We're using all the negativity around here and channeling it into something positive, to actually feel like we have purpose in life. Because you can easily end up in a position where you feel like you don't have a purpose. So doing these type of classes, doing the volunteer work we do, in hospice, all of these things we're doing, and we're channeling this negative experience into something positive. So I think that's one of the most important things we can do to navigate through this situation in life.

Herbert: Why do you think that works so effectively?

Anthony: Because you're creating a legacy, you're building purpose. Like most people that do a lot of negativity in life, most of them probably feel like they don't have a purpose. And so when you actually have found something that you can put your energy into, where you see is making a difference or that you know is going to make a difference, it validates you, it validates your experience. And so, as human beings, we need value, one way or another.

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The same reason young people get into crime and gangs and stuff like that, because there's a false sense of value in those things at the time. You use the same thing on the positive model.

That all of this generativity is occurring in a prison environment is no small accomplishment. Here's Shadd Maruna again.

Maruna: I think of generativity in prisons as sort of like the flowers growing through the cracks in the concrete sort of thing. On the one hand, you couldn't imagine a worse environment for generativity. You couldn't, if you were trying to create an institution that killed off that impulse, the prison would be that. You know, you've got individuals who we've completely infantilized. We've taken away their agency. You tell them when to wake up, when to go to sleep, when they can leave their room, what they can do when they leave the room and so forth. So it's enormously difficult to go through those kind of normal maturational processes in a bizarre institution like that. On the other hand, against all these odds, prisons can be a site of enormous generativity. At least the impulse to generativity seems exceptionally high, especially among prisoners. You see prisoners acting as mentors, as therapists, as big brothers, fathers, mothers, carers to other prisoners in particular inside. They're also desperate to get involved in, however they can, in their own families and charitable work and the community work, trying to give something back to society. And part of this is trying to prove themselves as being more than just the worst thing they've ever done.

Their generative efforts do seem to help the men redefine who they are. And often, they wish to share this feeling with others.

Cameron: You do see guys change. It's not as common or as widespread as I would like, but it is satisfying when you see those guys you done time with, and fought beside or against for years, making those changes and doing positive stuff and becoming successful, like that's really great to see. And to be in a leadership role and I hope helping to facilitate that change is extremely rewarding. For me, I've found the biggest indicator of change is trying to give it to others. And that's what I found with people who go through these transformative experiences and paradigm shifts, is they want to give it to others, you know. You feel better for having gone through it, and so you want to share it with others.

So, the journey toward making amends can lead many prisoners to be generative, to be concerned about others, to work hard to make their prison environment as positive as possible. This desire to make good can also be understood as a means of repentance, of honoring their victims with their good deeds.

Moustafa: I feel like I got something to prove. I feel like I've been judged and labeled by the worst mistake in my life, and that mistake did not take over a span of a minute. And ever since I'm on a mission to, I don't know, prove to whom, that I'm not the sum total of that mistake. That I'm better than that, that I'm a good human being. And that is portrayed in daily actions.

Repentance as a means of atonement – that's next time on Making Amends.