

Episode Three: And It is Hard

Herbert: Have you had situations where you've had to walk away from potential violence?

Cameron: So, I've had situations where previously there would've been no question this is violence, right. And then, now, I try to find another route.

This is Cameron. He's describing how he wants to avoid the violence that was once a central part of his life in prison.

Cameron: I would not be accepted on the yard if I just completely curled up in a ball as someone's T-ing off on me. But I've found that that's not necessarily, there's not these two extremes, where you always take flight or you curl up in a ball. You can stand as a man with integrity who's not going to be pushed around and not push other people around. And that's where I've had to find, is that middle ground.

Herbert: And that must've been challenging?

Cameron: Yes. It's a lot of stopping those initial gut reactions, you know. When my brain was developing, I was in the hyper-masculine criminal world, where violence is the only answer. And so now when things happen, my initial reaction is still -- punch him in the face. But I have that second firing that's like, "Oh, let's take a look at this." And again that goes back to me actually making decisions. You know, I can actually comprehend the issue that's going on and weigh these different options I have, rather than just react.

Cameron had just turned 19 when he was arrested for a string of robberies. Like many young people when they first come to prison, Cameron felt a strong need to find a place to belong. So he joined a prison crew.

But this crew trafficked in violence, because, in prison, violence can be an important way to earn respect.

Cameron: This is literally a common quote that people give as advice to kids coming into prison -- when in doubt, just fight. If you don't know what to do, just fight. So, I mean that's how you solve problems, that's what's respected, that's the common way to do things.

So for Cameron to find a path toward being a better person, he had to distance himself from his crew and its embrace of violence. In the closed world of prison, that's not always easy.

This is Making Amends. I'm Steve Herbert. I was granted access to the Oregon State Penitentiary, where I got to know Cameron and several of his peers. In this series, we are exploring how many prisoners reckon with the past and how they search for a way to atone.

In our last two episodes, we explored what can trigger the motivation to start on the journey toward making amends. But assuming you do want to embrace a new lifestyle, why might

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that be difficult to do when you are incarcerated? What is it about the social world of prison that can make it a challenge to leave the past behind?

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Cameron: Oh, super sweet. Yeah, I was a super sweet kid. Just super empathetic and caring. I remember one time there was this kid, he clearly had, now that I think back on it, some emotional, mental issues, you know. And he was just a trouble maker, made the class miserable because he just, throwing fits all the time, right. And he was just in a big fit one day and my birthday was coming up and, uh, we were not friends. But he was in such a fit, I went over and invited him to my birthday party, which snapped him out of the little fit he was in. I feel like that was pretty characteristic of me as a kid.

Cameron may have started out as a super sweet kid, but as he got older, he began to drift in a different direction.

Cameron: I always liked the outlaws, man. When I was a kid, I was always drawn to the outlaws. I remember thinking all the time when I was a kid like, "What am I gonna be like when I'm grown up," you know. But it was something about the outlaw that was cool. Danger, excitement, you know. It was the alternative thing, you know. I've never been one for the mainstream.

Cameron's desire to be outside the mainstream led him away from school and toward alcohol and drugs. He dropped out in the ninth grade.

Herbert: So, what's a typical day like?

Cameron: Sleep until noon, wake up, hustle up enough money to get high, get high, and sit around. Maybe go to a party.

Herbert: How are you hustling the money?

Cameron: Oh, uh, different ways, little scams we had, steal, selling drugs, all of that.

Herbert: Not working a regular job.

Cameron: Well, I mean I was fifteen, sixteen, you know, so no one was all anxious to hire a long-haired, dirty kid who ain't in school, you know?

Eventually, heroin became Cameron's drug of choice. But it's an expensive habit. So, he turned to robbery.

Herbert: So how many robberies did you end up doing?

Cameron: Fourteen.

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Herbert: Fourteen. In a short period of time?

Cameron: A month and a half.

Herbert: So, again, are you thinking beyond the next high?

Cameron: No. My girlfriend at the time asked me, she goes, "Like what are you doing? When are you going to stop doing this? Like what's going on?" And I go, "I'll stop when I get caught." That was a joke at the time, but I think that is just very, it shows just how I was not thinking, you know. Like there was literally no thought of tomorrow in my head, let alone getting a decade and a half in prison.

When Cameron arrived in prison, he had to figure out how he was going to fit in.

Cameron: When you're 19 and you say you got 12 years to do, you see that as your life. Like whatever is before me, this is going to be my life for as long as I can tell, right. So, I wanted to succeed in this world, and I wanted to belong. I had that need of a young man to belong to something and to have camaraderie and brotherhood and friends.

Herbert: So, how did that translate into life in prison?

Cameron: Oh, I was drawn to the crews, the guys that were violent and had power and authority in here.

Herbert: How do you become a member of that group?

Cameron: You just, you find one, you find a group that you fit in with.

Herbert: But they weren't necessarily doing morally upstanding activities?

Cameron: No, they were criminals. They were criminals that banded together for whatever purpose, you know. Typically, it was violence, you know. You stand together. So, a lot of the stuff in prison is we make ourselves, but even though we make it ourselves, it's violent and you know when one group comes at you, you have to have another group to combat it. So, that's the formation of the crews.

Herbert: And is the violence about anything in particular?

Cameron: Oh, it's about everything, but nothing important, nothing that matters. It's just that when you have all power taken from you and you're incarcerated, you find things to make you feel powerful. Like, this is my chair, you looked at me wrong, you know. You seek power in other ways and that's usually what it's over. So, it's all power struggles.

Herbert: So, it's about everything but it's about nothing.

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Cameron: Nothing that would to someone outside looking in you'd be like, "What, like what does that matter? That's ridiculous." But to us in the moment it seems like something, you know.

Herbert: So, I've heard you say two things: one is that you were looking to belong, and you were looking to have some sense of power.

Cameron: Yes.

Herbert: And that explains it.

Cameron: I think so. That's how I've explained it to myself.

Like Theron and Anthony, who we met in episode one, Cameron formed a tight bond with his fellow crew members.

Cameron: It's a sense of brotherhood, it's a sense of family, it's a sense of belonging to something greater than yourself, right. When you come to prison, you are stripped from your biological family and you need to find a new one. And that's what I was given. And these guys, they taught me how they had found best to live. You don't take shit, you're violent, you're tough. But then they also encouraged me to stay away from drugs, to read books, to do these other things, you know. Like, they taught me how they had best found to live.

Herbert: In prison.

Cameron: In prison, yes. And maybe they didn't find the best way possible, but they taught me what they knew. And it's not, I don't believe it's predatory, they're not looking for someone to do their dirty work, you know. They're literally, they see a kid that's lost and needs to belong and try to teach him what they know.

Cameron's commitment to his crew only became stronger when he suffered the traumatic experience of seeing his best friend killed. The two of them were teamed up in a fight on the prison yard. In response to the fight, a correctional officer in a watch tower shot his friend.

Cameron: And that was a big moment in my life, you know. I watched him die right there in front of me. Yeah, that had a big impact on me. So what ended up happening is that I grasped onto the prison culture and my group and everything with a tighter grasp, because his dying was pointless, you know. But if I held onto it, like this was important, then he died for something else. So, I held onto it even harder, and held to the politics even more, for a lot of years.

Eventually, Cameron came to see things differently, in part because he started to read philosophy.

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Cameron: I was definitely drawn to the moral questions. Because of where life had brought me, you know, this, two completely different codes of what society says is right and what the convict code is and where those lines touch and where they don't. I was taught through, in society and by my family and everything, that these things were right and then when I came to prison I was taught that these things were right. You know some of them correlated, some of them didn't. So for a while I looked at it as, "Well I'm in here now, so I'm gonna go by this moral code. When I get out there, I'll go by that moral code, you know." You know at a certain point that became not good enough and I had to decide really what my truth was and my morality and what I actually thought was the right thing.

His exploration of philosophy led Cameron to ask questions about several aspects of the moral code of prison.

Cameron: There's the moral question of, let's say, you are in the position where someone calls you out to fight. Now if you say no to that fight because you're terrified, then you could say that that's cowardice, that's a vice. There's some validity there. I was raised in that, I understand that. But then there's the other aspect of, what if you got a visit coming up, what if you got good time that you ain't going to be there with your kids, you know. There's all these other circumstances where fighting is not the right thing to do, you know. But basing people's character on their willingness to commit violence and that's it. Yeah, when I really sat down and thought -- that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

Herbert: So, in terms of this crew that you were a part of, how easy or hard is it to separate from them?

Cameron: I would say the hardest part is that I really care about them, you know. For all the negative things that they taught me, all the bullshit that is involved with it -- they really cared about me and tried to guide me in the direction they thought was good. Now, as I got older and realized that path isn't so good, that doesn't stop them from the place that they hold in my heart, that they really did care about me. And when I needed a family, they gave me a family, right. But at a certain point, I just had to keep in my mind like what kind of man do I want to be? And if I keep doing that same old shit, I'm going to be the same old guy. And I wanted to be someone different, so I had to do something different.

Herbert: So, you're leaving one kind of moral world behind, which is not all bad, right? You have security, you have respect, you have people who genuinely care about you. And you're moving to another moral world, but it's not one you've really lived.

Cameron: No.

Herbert: That must've been hard. You're embracing a world that you don't really, you haven't experienced.

Cameron: Yeah. And it is hard. And I do have certain obligations, because I'm still from that world, right. No matter what direction I'm headed, I'm still, as long as I'm in, behind these

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walls, I'm still from that world on the yard. So, it's really hard to navigate the two sometimes, but again, I just have to keep in mind what kind of man do I want to be.

Cameron was not the only member of my class who struggles with leaving the past behind. Theron also feels a sense of obligation to his old friends, especially those who helped protect him when violent conflicts emerged with other groups. He described his dilemma to his classmates one morning.

Theron: It's not that the values necessarily have changed, it's how I view them. Like loyalty for instance. Who am I loyal to? You know, the value of honor. Who am I being honorable to? I think it's how we shift that, but -- and then it's the pain of just feeling like, because I'm at a point in my life to change and try to transform my own self that I'm leaving people behind. So I think, when I see people that I know, that I care about and they don't see what I see, then there's a pain in that sense that like, damn. Am I betraying this friendship because I see a better way? They can't see it. And I think that's painful because like, "Fuck. Can't you just see, just open up your eyes and-." But then again, it hurts to walk away from certain things, too. Because if I walk away from them and then something happens, do I feel obligated to protect a person that's protected me in certain situations? And that's a painful thought to have to try to process, too.

For Cameron, to leave his old world behind meant confronting the fear that he was abandoning the memory of his friend, the one who died next to him on the yard.

Herbert: How have you come to terms with Jason's death?

Cameron: I don't know what that means.

Herbert: How do you, I mean, if that was sort of the impediment how have you managed your way around it?

Cameron: I think, you know, we were friends. And I think, what would he want? Does he want me to be a jackass on the yard for the rest of my life? Because he was a good person, he was a really good person. And, no, he's going to want me to be a better man. He's going to want me to be successful. He's going to want me to have a family. I'm not doing him any justice by being a bad person, you know. That's an injustice to him, to be a bad person. You know, I get to leave here, he doesn't, so I got to make my life mean something.

Herbert: So, it sounds like you feel like you owe something to him as much as anybody else that was involved in any of this.

Cameron: Absolutely.

Steve: I'd drive past here when I was really young. And we would slow down on this road over here, and my brother would slow down. And all of my brothers had been here, and they'd point at this wall over here, and they'd say, "Hey, look!" And I'd go, "What?" And

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they'd say, "There's home." It was just an understood thing that eventually I was gonna end up here.

Herbert: And did you believe that?

Steve: Wholeheartedly. I knew, eventually. Now that I long back on it, people would say that: "In prison, it's like this, when you get to prison, it's like that." So I was not surprised that I got here at all.

Because he was not surprised to arrive at the penitentiary, Steve was prepared to learn its ways quickly. Just like Cameron, he found his way to a prison group after he was convicted of a murder he committed at the age of 18.

Steve: I kind of grew up knowing exactly what prison was like. And, you know growing up, kinda poor like I was or whatever, like this, it wasn't really much of an adjustment for me. It just seemed like another apartment building, and a lot of the same guys I knew growing up were sitting on that yard. It wasn't an adjustment for me at all. It was just life.

Steve's early life in prison was much like Cameron's – regular use of violence to defend himself and his group of friends, frequent trips to solitary confinement. It took something unexpected to lead him to reconsider his situation.

Steve: One experience that I had that I remember distinctly, where I felt kinda weird. I was in the hole for a riot, the first riot I was in. I was down there doing six months in the hole, but while I was down there, my brother killed himself. And I remember just being, like, man. He was the only person who really used to write me or send me magazines, he'd been to prison a bunch. And it kind of affected me in a weird way that I kind of thought I was beyond. That impacted me weird. And then I call my sisters. I didn't talk to them, like we kind of lost contact back in the 90's, and they were, they seemed pretty distraught over it. We're talking and I'm seeing that effect on them, and it kind of makes me realize like there's more going on in the world beyond these little wars we're creating up in here, for nothing. I don't want to be that monster. If I'm in here just trying to murder people all the time and attack people, like I'm creating more harm to these people. I'm not really creating a person that deserves love or, you know, cared about.

Yet Steve's violence was mostly about helping others.

Steve: I've tried really hard to do good things for people. Sometimes it comes off as is bad in these reports I'm sure, but I always come at it with, like, a good heart and trying to protect people. And that's probably one of my flaws, actually. I need to quit helping people like that.

Herbert: You mean by being violent?

Steve: Sometimes you got to be violent to help people in here. Sometimes that's the nicest thing you can do in a place like this.

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Herbert: So how do you thread that needle? I mean, how do you care about someone without ending up in the hole?

Steve: That's the struggle I'm in at this point in my life. My struggle is that I see things a certain way, where things can be talked out so to speak. Every conflict can be, can have a resolution to it, pretty much without fail if you really put your mind around it. You know, it comes down to a couple basic needs. And so I'm trying to impart that knowledge on the next generation. I'm trying to say, "Look man, you could either go this way and here's the six things that are going to happen, that I know for a fact. Or it can go this way. You know, I've seen it all, I can tell you all, and there's a better way to do it." So if they do my way, or you know, they do what I try to teach him to do, then all the conflicts can get resolution.

Herbert: Well break that down for me. What does that alternate path, what are the steps in that alternate path?

Steve: Mostly, you just got to start out and ask people like, basically, "What's your, what's happened? What makes you feel aggrieved? And what do you need me to do to fix that?" And then meet 'em in the middle usually.

Herbert: So give me an example. What would cause tension?

Steve: So, like if somebody out here owed somebody money. That person of course wants to have money. But realistically, long as you stand up and regular about it, it doesn't got to end in violence. You know things happen to people in here with money.

Herbert: So how do you keep it from ending in violence?

Steve: If I was brought in the middle of something like that, I will try to just hear both sides explain -- usually people, if they could just communicate. They both have wants and needs and those will be resolved. But nobody in here knows how to do that, especially not the younger guys. They are too hyped up and their ego is in the way.

The struggle to avoid violence is something with which everyone in my class is familiar. And they develop a range of strategies to try to keep things calm. Here's Terrence describing an approach that sometimes works for him.

Terrence: I think sometimes you have to think for the other person. We get emotional and stuff. We all got stuff going on in our lives and everything else. I bump into you and you got stuff going on and I got stuff going on and now we're emotional and now we're in a bad situation. I remember, I was in a situation with an older white guy in the unit and there wasn't anyone at this table, so I just sat my stuff down and he got an attitude about it. He was like, "Well, we can go in the cell and fight." And I told him, I said, "Listen, I have no problem going in the cell and taking it out on you. Whether I win or lose, that's not the issue. It'll be a release. But, at the same time, you're going to the parole board in the next eight months. How do you feel about going to the parole board from the hole? Think about

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that." At the time, that little sentence, I could see that his brain heard it. And he was like, "You know what, fuck you," and he walked away. Sometimes we need to be able to think for the next person.

Theron: But that was a unique way of communicating, because you were bringing him back to what's important. You know what I mean?

Ben: And gave him a way out.

Theron: But it's showing that, "Look, I understand that you're upset. This anger, going to the cell and fighting ain't going to really solve our anger. It ain't going to really solve the fact that I put my stuff here first. You know, at the end of the day what's important to you? Going and fighting because of this table or actually thinking about going home in eight months."

For his part, as he's learned to practice non-violence, Steve seems to have found a measure of peace.

Herbert: So do you think you're discovering a new person or are you rediscovering who you always were?

Steve: I think I'm discovering a new person because I wasn't really raised to be a nice guy, I don't think.

Herbert: You couldn't have been a nice guy growing up?

Steve: No, not the way I grew up. It wouldn't have worked out too good. Yeah, I don't know, I think I've discovered a new person.

Herbert: And how do you feel about him?

Steve: I feel good. I feel more at ease, less stress. Less anger, resentment. Just c'est la vie.

As the stories of Cameron and Steve illustrate, it can be a challenge to accomplish personal change inside a prison. If status and respect require the use of violence, it can be risky to search for another path, especially if it means leaving your best friends behind.

To leave behind violence also means to leave behind some of the norms of masculinity that are very common in prison. These norms can make it hard for men to acknowledge their emotions, and to work to control them.

Theron: So, in a situation, I can be thinking, "It's like, okay, if I'm the boss in my brain, who's running the show right now?" Is it my emotional part? Is my emotional, is my anger, is my feelings of insecurity or rejection controlling me, because this is what's gonna lead me to not be so smart and go back to my old habit, which is to flash out, to which is just to

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be very impulsive, which is to not think things through. But my smart part, my smart part is the part that's saying, "You know what? Stop. Chill out."

How to challenge the norms of masculinity on the journey toward atonement – that's next time on Making Amends.