

Happiness in Prison?

Happy Camper

When I wrote the essays that formed the basis of the book "It's All Thought! The Science, Psychology and Spirituality of Happiness," I was in a Camp. Not the sort of camp where you sing Kumbaya, roast marshmallows, and eat smores. I was in a federal prison camp.

Lucky guy that I am, I had earlier decided to retire to the Caribbean in the early 1990's and do some business and financial consulting. (Read: workaholic who just had to keep busy even though he was technically retired and didn't have to work.) Previously, I had been the founder of an international business. The company had grown to about 250 offices around the world, and I was feeling worn out.

The Caribbean seemed like a nice place to go, at least for the colder half of each year, so my wife, Maureen, and I purchased a two-story condo in a gated community on the beach of one of those idyllic islands we frequently refer to as a tropical paradise. And amazingly, it was just that. Over the next few years, four of my nine books were published, and I recorded a fourteen hour lecture series, which was distributed along with a fifth manuscript. Together these eventually got me into trouble with three agencies of the federal government. Federal authorities did not like what I wrote. They did not like my talk show interviews. And they did not like my latest business venture...working in the offshore financial services arena, representing a couple hundred legal and accounting firms. The fact that I had secured 23 written legal opinions from various U.S. law firms for all aspects of this particular business project did not deter the federal agencies intent upon taking me out. They simply ignored the written legal and accounting counsel that conflicted with the positions they had decided to take.

I admit that I threw the proverbial first stone. From my perspective I felt like federal appointees were supposed to be reprimanded, and their nefarious deeds made public. Alas, that's not the way they saw it. Yep, I did the Don Quixote thing, jousting with windmills. My motivation was inspired by an oft-quoted phrase (at least I quoted it a lot), by Lord Actun, when in 1887 he stated: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

It wasn't just the books and my latest business venture that had made some ranking politicians angry. I fancied myself something of an outside whistle-blower and so I had begun to publish a newsletter directed to members of Congress and

other influential people around the world. The newsletter was focused on federal abuse of power. By the time 9-11 hit, I was in full swing, telling anyone who would listen about the depth of deceit in Washington. The government went blitzkrieg on me, and oddly enough, the same agencies I had been taking shots at for years, in lectures, books, radio shows, and newsletters, slammed me, BIG TIME.

Now I probably need to stop the story for a moment and share that I was a happily married man and had been for many years. My lovely wife and I were blessed with eight children, and by this time the kids were grown and had made us grandparents more than twenty times over. To keep the story short, I'll simply say that agents of the federal government crushed me and terrorized my entire family. While awaiting a trial that never came, my wife's health failed. Maureen passed away in my arms, eight months after an official esophageal cancer determination. We had been married 42 years. For the most part, we had a magical life together.

To add insult to considerable injury, the IRS subsequently generated several unsubstantiated fines for what they referred to as "conspiracy to defraud the government," the same charge for which I was being prosecuted criminally. While the fines ran into the tens of millions, no detail was provided either to me or my legal counsel for a number of years. Meanwhile, I was stripped of all my material assets, including over \$25 million in cash, plus properties, precious metals, securities, et cetera.

Lessons Learned

I learned a great deal about love, honor, and service during the eight months I administered Maureen's hospice care. I was ever so fortunate to provide this heartfelt, hour-by-hour, attention. She was sick, and frequently in pain, but always more concerned about others than her own difficult circumstances. What a wonderful lesson in love. I am sobered to have learned this in such a poignant way.

Throughout Maureen's final months, we enjoyed meaningful connections and deeply spiritual experiences. At the moment of her death I received a beautiful witness of the continuation of life beyond the grave. The potent insight gained as a consequence of the experiences leading up to, during, and after, the death of my lifetime companion, has powerfully enriched my life. These were not unhappy events. They were sometimes incredibly sad and melancholy, but not wretched or miserable.

In the end, I learned with renewed significance how important it is to be in touch with my own feelings. Slowly I began to gain a greater understanding of the importance self-acceptance. I allowed myself to grieve and feel sad. I am human. These powerful emotions are a part of humanity. There is an uplifting richness of spirit as we permit ourselves to be what we are, rather than bottling up our emotions and presenting a tough exterior.

While confined at the Sheridan Prison Camp, which I eventually began calling the "Monastery in Sheridise," I was able to look more deeply within. And, before long I began to employ some incredibly powerful techniques that allowed me to release negative energy patterns. The process of releasing and forgiving, coupled with an expanded mental paradigm driven by amazing new scientific and spiritual insights, made all the difference. A huge shift took place within me. Life took on new levels of meaning. Gratitude, love, forgiveness, and self-acceptance became my companion.

Over a number of years I had been a counselor to hundreds of the wealthy on some of their most intimate matters, and I've seen people miserable at the top of their game. In thinking that through, I began to recognize that a happy person is not a person in a certain set of circumstances, but rather a person with a certain set of attitudes. In the words of William James, philosopher and psychologist, and the man frequently referred to as one of the founding fathers of modern psychology: "The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude."

Eventually, it became obvious to me that we all have the power to dramatically change our lives for the better, notwithstanding our circumstances! This is a bold statement. It is based upon the remarkable results I personally witnessed after sharing the thinking, concepts, and techniques, with men and women from all walks of life, and particularly with hundreds of men in county jails and federal prisons. It is with these last, the largely forgotten people where the misery index is so high, that the impact has been so powerfully beneficial.

As you might suspect, most prisoners are swamped with feelings of helplessness. They do not believe they can make major changes in their lives. They see themselves as victims of an unfeeling and unjust system, and to great extent they are right. That's not to say that there is not valid reason for some being incarcerated. The point, however, is that among the men I worked with, where happiness was only a fantastical theory and rarely a believable reality, incredible results occurred.

Circumstances and situations color life, but it is we, and we alone, who choose the hue, tint, and tone. And if we are lucky, ultimately we will come to realize that nothing real actually stands between us and happiness, only illusion and our own confusion.

My obsession with the concepts of happiness evolved over the several months prior to my self-surrender to federal prison, (that's the legal term for turning yourself in on a preset date.) This was after my precious Maureen had passed and I was deeply concerned for my family's well-being. Eight children - seven of them with children of their own - were suffering the loss of their mother. Maureen had been especially active with our household and cared deeply about others. Family and close friends were in shock at Maureen's passing. Our matriarch was gone. At times, she had suffered miserably with esophageal cancer. I had been with her throughout her entire ordeal. The judge hearing my case allowed me to provide her home care while dealing with aggressive federal agencies, facing criminal prosecution at the behest of the IRS, and undergoing two spinal surgeries. Only a few months after her passing, my family was to lose their patriarch, as I headed off to prison.

The circumstances of my life had all the ingredients of a sorrowful melodrama, which I suppose in many ways it was. For the eight months after Maureen's death, while I waited to report to prison, I set about determining how to best ease my family's loss. Many nights I lay awake, seeking support from a higher power. One memorable night, Maureen spoke to me in a dream. In her wisdom she told me that all the help I needed was right before me. I had but to refocus on the things I already knew were true and be grateful for things as they were right now in the very present, and not only would our children's lives be improved, but so would mine and many others. I came straight up from my bed, a single snapshot of the future blazoned into my brain. In many ways this dream seemed much more real than the day-to-day activities of my waking life. The experience was so vivid, so powerful, and so incredibly intense, that it continues to shape my thoughts and choices to the present. That very night, just two months before going to prison, I got up and wrote a one-page paper to myself, endeavoring to sort out what I was thinking. I titled it, *My Reality*, and although I would write it differently today, it's included exactly as it was originally written to provide a frame of reference.

"My Reality

I believe that each of us is capable of molding our realities to the degree permitted by the bounds of our creation. What those bounds are I am not entirely sure, but I suspect we are permitted much more maneuverability than we allow ourselves to believe. Life surely teaches us that form follows thought, i.e.: “What a man thinketh in his heart so is he.” This philosophical model suggests that each of us are largely in charge of our affairs, or at least more so than most would concede. Believing this, I conclude that it is basically up to me to “conceive and believe” myself out of the box I currently view myself within. In other words, I accept that I am responsible for my series of tests in this world, regardless of whether or not I suppose that someone, or some institution, is being unfair in its dealings with me. Thus, if I am a victim, it is only because at some mysterious level, I allow, or perhaps even encourage, it to happen.

To escape my current reality, I must step up and see in my mind’s eye, another improved reality. When I am able to vividly imagine a new reality, and believe fervently in its possibility, things will likely change for the better. This process is the essence of conceiving and believing.

Whereas “faith precedes the miracle,” thought, conception, and a passionate desire for a new outcome must first pave the way, or belief will be unable to mature into faith, and generate sufficient power to advance a new reality.

Just the act of taking responsibility for my own reality helps improve things. I am not a cork bobbing on the waters of life. I can exert influence and call down power to steer a better course. Although I do not understand the *why* of everything that we may encounter in this life, I believe that in the end, everything will synthesize for our best interests. And, notwithstanding current circumstances, I feel better than one might expect. And I sincerely believe that things will work out in some marvelous way.

The mental and emotional act of taking full responsibility for my circumstances made a pivotal difference in my attitude. I was no longer a victim. It was not long thereafter that I came to realize that nothing is ever enough if we judge that we are not enough. It turns out that joy is centered in self-acceptance. It is freedom from self-judgment.”

Working with this improved foundation, I set about changing the only person I could: me. I had two months to build a better me before reporting to prison. A powerful desire to transcend my current level of consciousness fueled much of

my thoughts and actions thereafter. I wasn't sure how to best go about it, but I was certain that this was what I should be about.

Prison

Upon reporting to the Federal Detention Center at Sheridan, Oregon, the monstrosly depressive environment struck me immediately. If you would like to read why and how I got there, and how and why I got released, see my essay, Federal Prosecution. The Detention Center is one of three prisons at Sheridan. It serves as a Maximum Security holding facility for those awaiting trial in federal court (a process that can sometimes take years). It is also a transfer station for inmates of all security levels waiting to be moved on to other locations. In my case, I was scheduled to be shifted to the Sheridan Prison Camp, a minimum security facility just a quarter mile away.

At the detention center we were packed three men to a tiny two-man cell and kept locked down 21 to 23 hours a day. On two occasions we were locked down all 24 hours, that was after an inmate got killed by another inmate. The first night I was fortunate to begin a friendship with two young men in their mid - to late - twenties. One was "Jason," a hip black urbanite, suffering from extreme claustrophobia. The other was "Sean," an angry white tough guy, who had temporarily lost his faith in humankind. Both had already spent several years in prison, and other than prior drug use, this may have been the only thing they had in common.

Although I was supposed to be held in the detention center for one night only, before being transferred to the minimum security camp, circumstances so combined as to keep the three of us locked together in the miniscule two-man cell for the next seven weeks. The prison business was booming, with new convictions generating more prisoners than there were prison cells to hold them throughout the federal system. We endeavored to make the best of a bad situation.

In case you were not aware, read this paragraph carefully, otherwise skip down to the next paragraph. (America locks up its citizens at roughly 5 to 10 times the rate of all other "first world" nations. In 2006 when I surrendered myself into Sheraton Prison, America had more people in prison than all the other first world countries combined. In fact, it held 25% of the entire world's prison population while accounting for less than 5% of the global population. According to the jailers at our prison, 80% of prisoners violate their parole, intentionally, or unintentionally, and are returned to prison. They call this revolving door of

prisoner release, re-offense, re-capture, re-intern, “recidivism.” Prison guards are vocal about recidivism being the guarantee of their career path.)

On day two of my initial lockdown, I suggested to my two fellow inmates that we somehow determine to make our small cell the happiest in the cellblock. Inasmuch as depression is the norm, and pervasive throughout jails and prisons generally, they agreed, probably out of simple respect for a gray-haired guy more than twice their age. So, with that, we began to orally “write” prison comedy skits about the very things that were literally destroying others, due to unaddressed anger and hyper-anxiety. We learned to laugh at ourselves. It drove the jailers nuts. We were not supposed to be laughing in a maximum security lock up.

The initial jail-holding experience was indescribably difficult in many ways, but our practiced effort to find something humorous about even the most unsettling encounters set the stage for all that followed. Concrete and steel is the stuff of prisons and cellblocks, and it makes for amazing echo chambers. The noise is constant and the guards do little to help anyone sleep. In fact, they often do quite the contrary. Samuel Clements, better known as Mark Twain, addressed this problem thus: *“If you want to see the dregs of society, go down to the jail and watch the changing of the guard,”* Nevertheless, we began to laugh so frequently and so hard that, during meals and our short releases to walk about the cellblock, a cluster of other inmates would approach us to find out what on earth could be happening in our “house.” We could hear others crying, yelling, and dying, but we could not see anything outside our cell, other than from a narrow window slit in a heavy steel door.

Over time, all the inmates in cellblock J-1 at Sheridan Detention Center learned of our plan to be the happiest cell in the cellblock. Inmates that had been shuttled through a dozen or more prisons began calling us the “happiest cell in the entire prison system.” We were able to laugh and inspire others, in spite of the gross ugliness of the prison environment.

By the third week, the whole cellblock had lightened up, and occasionally some of the guards dared to be nice for brief periods. In spite of policy to the contrary, one particular guard, who was very interested in what I was doing, unlocked our cell seven Sundays in a row and allowed other inmates to cram in, or sit around the outside of the heavy steel door, in order to take part in a civilized discussion about spirituality and the pursuit of happiness. This was a form of church, which this jailer felt would be acceptable to his superiors. This was remarkable progress for all of us.

The 23 hours a day lockup eased off to 21 hours, and then 20 hours, providing time each day to meet with others at tables in the central eating area. The trustees over food preparation and the entire prison building, were a dozen members of a notorious Hispanic gang known as the Nortenos. The gang's local lieutenant learned of my passion for Mesoamerican archaeology and discovered that I had made several dozen trips to Mexico and Central America studying the history of the area. He decided that his contingent of Nortenos should learn about their heritage... from me. So, prior to my cell being unlocked for "walk" each day, a prison guard would unlock my cell and escort me to a bunch of tables set up for me to address the trustees. This was a bit surreal, but here under these odd circumstances, it was just a natural unfolding of events. And life improved.

Finally after seven weeks of maximum security, Sean and I were released to the Camp. The two of us simply walked out the front door of the Sheridan Detention Center. We walked out alone; no guards. It was so unnerving for Sean, who had already been in prison almost five years, he froze and refused to go any further for fear someone would claim we were trying to escape. We turned around and headed back into the maximum-security facility and reconfirmed we were being instructed to walk through an unguarded parking lot and down the road to the minimum security camp facility. Now *that* was surreal! We were on the outside... at least for a few minutes. As it turned out, the camp didn't even have a fence around it, only on one side to separate the federal prison camp from a state park. Men sent to the camp had no history of violence and were neither dangerous nor considered a flight risk.

The infamous Nortenos would never be allowed to the camp, but they could not be released into the medium security prison to serve their sentences as the "yard" of the large prison was controlled by their hated enemies, a few hundred Sureños. These two Mexican gangs are sworn to kill one another on sight. Ergo, the prison system had a problem. They must figure out how to keep these gangs separated. Technically they could not keep a dozen Nortenos in maximum security, and they could not release them to minimum security. If they were to put them where they belonged by law in the normal medium security prison, it would be war. The Nortenos would all be killed and probably take some of the Sureños along with them. So, the Bureau of Prisons, the "BOP", gave the Nortenos trustee status and let them walk freely about in a high security prison in order to save their lives. Curious to me, was that the Lieutenant of the Nortenos who had organized my release each day to teach his guys, was educated, and a former parole officer in Stockton, California. He wanted his people to learn and progress

and get past their murderous conduct. I was getting an education about all kinds of things I would never have known on the outside.

A week after I was released to the camp, Jason was transferred to the camp. He never got out of the orientation meeting. Due to a miscommunication with a prison staffer, an event to which both Sean and I had earlier been privy, Jason was set up to be an example to other inmates. In front of several men who had that same day been released from the Detention Center and walked to the camp, Jason was cuffed, chained, and taken to a higher security prison. The message was clear. You are not free. And you are completely subject to the whims of those who are in charge. Deal with it.

The day I arrived at the camp, I was “hired” to work in the Education Department. As I arrived at the camp’s orientation center there was a loudspeaker calling my name saying to report to the education department. I had no idea where that might be or what I was to do. I ignored it thinking it must not be me that was being paged and I went on into the orientation meeting I had been instructed to attend. Then the paging started again, I hesitantly asked the officer in charge what to do. He said leave. Duh. And go where? He pointed. “That way.” A bizarre change from being locked up in a small cell for seven weeks and now I was being told to walk about until I found the Education department.

As it turned out, I was fortunate. One of the guards in maximum security had told the director of Education for the three federal prisons in the area, that I had prisoners paying close attention to what I was teaching the Nortenos about Mesoamerican archeology. This Hispanic gang is normally considered a very violent group but there I was keeping them all entertained daily for an hour outside my cell. I had no idea how unusual this was, it just was. Now, I was to teach high school education. This provided me with flexibility and the opportunity to interact with the majority of inmates as two-thirds of them had not graduated from high school, and they would be mandated into my classes. In addition to my daytime teaching assignments, shortly after arrival, I volunteered to provide Adult Continuing Education classes at night. This allowed me to develop my own course material over a whole range of subjects, from Astronomy, Physics, and Ancient World History to my most popular course: “Introduction to Deep Thinking, and The Philosophy of Self-Improvement.” For ten quarters, every optional nighttime class I taught was over-subscribed, requiring extra desks and chairs to be moved into my classroom until the bodies limited per room was maxed out. Other potential students were wait-listed for future classes. It was crazy.

One dark night, I had the lights off in my classroom showing a video on astronomy that I had surreptitiously got mailed into the religious center by a Bishop. He marked it as religious information. The warden, a woman dressed completely in black with a black baseball cap, slipped into the back of the classroom, and stood there leaned up against the door jam watching my intermittent lecturing as I suspended parts of the video to explain various details. I saw her, but did not realize it was the warden, I thought it was someone from administration just checking on our goings on. Which is exactly what she was doing. She flipped on the lights and blurted out why were the lights out. Apparently that was a violation, which I did not know. She did the expected unnecessary swearing routine and left. I was shaken. Not long thereafter I was called to the warden's office. She referred to me as the "shot caller." I had no idea what that meant, but kept my mouth shut. Later I asked a couple of guys what that was, and they laughed at my ignorance. It meant the warden had figured out I was the inmate in charge of the prison camp. The warden had figured that out, and so had a lot of the inmates, but it took me months before I realized what this really meant.

Based upon literally hundreds of conversations with inmates, I began to realize that life gives us repeated opportunities to learn. When we don't, we tend to get stuck with a series of similar experiences until we "get" the lesson life is trying to teach us. I also learned that nothing has any real meaning outside of the meaning we alone give it. Yes, I realize this may sound rather odd, but hold your judgment for a while. And, while you're at it, begin right now to neutralize all that drama that tends to pop up in your life by learning to laugh at yourself. I love the quote from Og Mandino in the seventh scroll when he said: "Man is most comical when he takes himself too seriously." Indeed, tis true.

We tend to believe that so many things are vitally important. Maybe they are but taking things so seriously that we forget to laugh, love, and be happy, is a serious mistake. In fact, when we find ourselves unhappy and unable to laugh, it's literally a life crisis. When written in Chinese, the word "Crisis" is composed of two characters. One represents danger, the other represents opportunity. I have lived in crisis way too many times and forgotten that I could choose another way of responding. I am again reminded that happiness is a choice. It is a choice in how to respond to everything that comes our way. We decide. No one else decides how we decide to respond.

The thoughts we think determine the degree of happiness we allow ourselves. Thoughts grow to fruition as the subconscious mirrors into our reality whatsoever

it is we focus upon that is nourished with feeling. The subconscious mind does not separate me from thee, so talking or thinking badly about others ultimately determines what subconsciously we believe about ourselves. Think good of others, we raise our opinion of ourselves. When we dwell on negative thoughts and think evil of others, we down-regulate our self-worth. It is critical to guard thoughts and avoid wrong thinking to be happy, healthy, and well.

Happiness is NOT found in the accumulation of things. Happiness is NOT derived from external experiences. Physical experiences may have a powerful and positive impact, but they are usually based on temporary pleasure and excitement. Happiness is a way of being. It is a fundamental attitude of gratitude. To be happy, we must decide with sincere conviction to focus on uplifting thoughts and feelings, even under difficult circumstances.

As it turns out, forgiveness and gratitude are the basis of happiness. To forgive is to show forth love...primarily to yourself, as most of the forgiveness needed in the world is from us to us. When that is well handled, and you can find it within you to love yourself, there is no further reason to hold anyone else responsible for your happiness. Then embark upon some form of radical gratitude. Gratitude expands both happiness and abundance. Remember, we are each responsible for our personal happiness; this is a basic choice of being. We choose. No one else is responsible for our individual happiness or the lack thereof. Happiness is a choice. Choose wisely.