Black People's Prison Survival Guide

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PREFACE

This book is written with the Black male in mind who is suffering the ordeal of incarceration. Although it is intended for Black males, it may be read by Black females suffering the same predicament. Also, the information and insights contained in the following pages might be valued by any of our people living in this society.

Some will question the purpose of such a book. They will read its title and feel a sense of shame and embarrassment in that persons of our race might need a guide to prison survival. Let me state that I feel a sense of shame and embarrassment, too; however, such a book is sorely needed and some benefit may derive from its publication.

Many of us suffer the "Ostrich Syndrome." We continuously bury our heads in the sand choosing to ignore certain realities in hopes that they will go away. The majority of us know someone who is locked up or who has been locked up or who has a family member who is now locked up. Going to prison has become a "common thing." Black people have been deeply affected by the American penal system. In society, we are a minority. In prisons we are the majority. America will continue to lock many of us up in the future. This country has succeeded in creating generations of Black prison class societies.

This is a self-help book. It is not just a textbook of practical jailhouse wisdom. It is a survival guide to help the reader safeguard his or her mental, physical and spiritual well-being while in prison. If you find yourself incarcerated, this book may prove itself especially useful to you. Experience is the most qualified teacher, and I have been well-schooled by my past experience with prisons and people in them. For the past 15 years, I have been locked up in Ohio prisons for a crime that admittedly, I did commit. Two days ago, at a parole hearing, I was given a five year continuance for being "too intelligent." The parole board said that the education I received while incarcerated makes me more dangerous to society. That may very well be true, but not in any physical sense, because I am not a criminal.

This book is about change. Hopefully, in reading it you will change your thinking, your way of seeing things, and change your way of life. One word of caution. I recognize that we are limited in our education, but I will not write down to anyone. You will do well to get yourself a dictionary and keep it handy. Look up each word you don't understand. Never skip over words because you don't understand them. Find their meanings. Remember: Lazy reading is a crime, too. It robs us of valuable knowledge.

Part I

AMERICA'S PENAL PAST

The first jail in America to house felons was the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia. It was built in 1790 by Quakers. During their imprisonment, prisoners received

intensive religious instruction and endured harsh physical labor to build their work ethic. They also observed complete silence. There was no socializing between prisoners, and often brutal disciplinary measures were used to ensure their silence. Later prisons were founded at Auburn, New York, in the 1820's and a reformatory at Elmira, New York in 1876. Like the Walnut Street Jail, these later prisons instituted religious instruction, rigorous labor, and absolute silence as part of their rehabilitative process. These early penal experiments failed, because of the high insanity rate resulting from the policy of enforced silence. Many of the prisoners went crazy from being given the "silent treatment."

Penology in this country has reached its apex development in the past 100 years. It is now a science. There are actually people who attend universities to major in this field of study. They eventually earn the title of "Penologist." We may logically conclude that penology has become very important. No major university would include useless courses of study in their curriculums. It has specific purpose. Penology is one of the basic Five P's now used to systematically control the unconscious masses (Philosophy, Psychology, Politics and Propaganda being the others.) At this point, let me emphasize that there has always been a connection between penology and labor. It is this connection that continues to affect Black people today.

PAST VICTIMS

The connection between penology and labor extends back to those early prisons in the colonies. Remember that labor was an integral part of the strict disciplinary regimen in those days. In those early prisons, the products that the prisoners made were later sold in the market place, and the prisoners received a small percentage of the profits as pay. The wardens were the ones who benefited from inmate labor.

After the Civil War, this country entered into what was known as the reconstruction period. The war had caused great property damage throughout the south. Large plantation houses had been destroyed during the fighting. Crops had died and there were no seasonal plantings. The northern forces had looted and pillaged as they swept their way to victory. All that had been damaged needed "reconstruction." This reconstruction period lasted for nearly 15 years after the war.

It is well documented that the African slaves had built up the whole of the Western hemisphere. A society and economy with free labor as its principle base could easily be developed and maintained. Slavery in the colonies was the first large scale capitalist venture, and the most successful up to that point. The African people had brought important skills with them from their lands. They weren't just cotton and tobacco pickers, as white historians and television would have us believe. They were the needed brick masons, carpenters, farmers, weavers, doctors, and "blacksmiths." If the Blacks were used to build up the south once, then they would surely be used again.

The newly freed slaves were as easily exploited by white southerners as the native people were by the early settlers. Free but uncertain, fearful of venturing out beyond the plantations of their births, they were easy targets for further exploitation. The plantation owners held out promises of better treatment, improved working conditions, and future pay as enticements for the freed Blacks to stay on and continue working. When these ploys failed, threats of lynching by groups such as the KKK held Blacks in check. After the period of reconstruction the south was thriving again.

We must keep in mind that this was a time of no industrialization. There were no machines to perform the work. Still the work had to be done. Cheap sources of labor were sorely needed to keep things running smoothly for the profiteers. Slavery took on another form; hence, we had its other version, the "chain gang." The majority of prisoners in the south who were sentenced to spend time on its chain gangs were Black men. The symbolic connection between the chain and slavery is obvious. The particular stigma attached to the chain gang itself denoted that not only was a man guilty of some offense, but that he was deserving of his bondage and punishment, i.e., "hard labor."

Herein, we can see the connection between penology, Black people, and labor exploitation. Across the south, those who benefited most from this updated form of forced labor were the states and local plantation owners. Forests were cleared, roads were built, levees were constructed, fields were plowed and cotton was picked by those early chain gangs. Many times these gangs were leased-out to work for farmers in nearby communities. The chain gang became an extension of slavery.

PRESENT VICTIMS

There are a variety of causes for crime in this country. Over the years, studies have been conducted to determine the causes of crime. No one specific cause or any exact combination of causes has been pin-pointed as the determining factors that lead to criminal behavior. Crime is a hot topic and punishment has become a big business.

The average white American, with nothing better to do, sits at home each evening viewing television programs such as Hard Copy and A Current Affair. These shows exploit crime to get higher viewer ratings. The more sensational crime it covers, the higher the show's ratings and the more commercial revenues it generates. The television program Cops gives actual footage of middle-aged, White suburban thrill-seekers and weekend survivalists, guns drown, crashing in the doors of terrified poor folks in their efforts to solve the crack (Black) problem. America loves it!

When people constantly view-crime as depicted on television, they build up an immunity to having compassionate feelings for the criminal. What circumstances played a part in causing another to commit a crime becomes less important.

Consideration is given only to his or her punishment. The insensitive public cries for blood. "Lock them up forever!" and "Throw away the key!" and "They ought to be fried!" became the cries of the day. Being influenced to react (it can't be called thinking) this way, our people are caught up in the same kind of dumb emotionalism. They make the same dumb statements, until it's a nephew or little brother who's sitting on death row. Only then do they stop to question what caused the nephew or little brother to go wrong. And there are many answers.

The attitudes about criminal behavior differ widely, depending on what country is looked at. A good example is Japan. In Japan, when a person is convicted of a crime it is seen as a failure of their society to provide the proper nurturing environment to mold that person into being a productive human being. Upon incarceration, extensive steps are taken to foster the rehabilitation of that person. On the other hand, in this country it is seen as a shortcoming of the individual who commits a crime and years of punishment is the best answer. Society shares none of the blame, although it creates criminals. Let us imagine this. A police decoy staggers down a dark street at night pretending to be drunk. He has a large wad of money sticking out of his pocket. Someone comes along, sees this, snatches the money, runs,-and is arrested by the police. In criminal law, there is a defense called "entrapment." It could be said that the poor man who snatched the baited money was victimized by circumstances which were set-up by the police; thus, he was "entrapped" into committing his crime.

As in the case of the poor man who snatched the money, society has set-up a host of circumstances in our environments which bring about criminality in some of our people. When drugs are made available, when there is a proliferation of guns in our communities and when our youths are programmed to be violent by music and television, then the entrapment defense has some validity too. We should be at least partially exonerated because of the host of circumstances society has set-up against us. The United States locks-up more Black people than racist South Africa. It creates criminals and jails them, because keeping a large prison population is beneficial. One reason for keeping a large prison population is population control. Fewer Black men means fewer Black babies. Another reason is that prisons employ a lot of poor, uneducated White people who are otherwise unemployable. Yet, the single most important reason is that it is profitable to lock people up. People who are locked up are easily exploited for their labor.

Today's modern prisons are industrialized. Top quality products are being manufactured in America's prisons on assembly lines. In many cases, gone are the days of just pressing license plates. Large corporations have cast their lots on the sides of prisons as being a cheap readily available source of labor. And the biggest advantage to these corporations is that there are no labor unions to deal with. Some of these corporations that have invested in prisons are TWA, AT&T, MCI, and Best Western, to name several.

One good example of prisoner labor exploitation is Ohio Penal Industries (OPI). OPI maintains factories in nearly all of Ohio's twenty-seven prisons. It reaps astronomical profits from the products it sells to the public, because it pays prisoners slave wages. It operates under the guise of training prisoners for employment when they are released, while it does not assist them in finding jobs when they get out. There is no unionization, and there is no form of compensation if prisoners are injured while working. The average pay for an OPI worker is less than $50 a month for 40 hours work weeks. An entire volume could be devoted to the exploits of OPI, but let it suffice here to say that OPI's competitors complained that they could not compete with OPI's prices because OPI maintains an almost zero per cent labor cost.

Recently, there has developed a trend of states that if a company can present a low cost analysis, it can own itself a prison (and the Black people in them). The advantage to these companies in running these private prisons is that they can profit from the inmate labor pool. They may in turn contract with outside companies to produce goods using inmate labor. Since the majority of people incarcerated are Black, we can make the connection between this form of labor exploitation and the chain gangs of the past.

A SCENARIO OF VICTIMIZATION

America's criminal justice system is not based upon justice or fair play. It is predicated on lies, trickery, and deceit. Whether one of us is innocent or guilty, we must recognize that when we enter the courtroom we have entered a bloody arena, where the prize at stake is our lives. Anything goes. Rights violations, prosecutor misconduct, coercion, perjured testimony, falsified reports, and the list goes on. What the prosecutor seeks is that initial conviction, because they know that the appeal process will drag on for years. While you rot behind bars, your appeal briefs will collect dust on some obscure judge's desk.

When we are indicted for our alleged wrongs, many times we are overcharged for the crime itself. They rack up many related charges that stem from one offense. We are faced with staggering amounts of time and our minds reel at the thought of doing so much time. "A thousand years?! All I did was ...," you ask and say. It is basic psychology. It is to ensure your full cooperation when you are offered the coveted "deal" that will allow you to spend less time behind bars. Actually, it is a ruse to frighten you into accepting a plea agreement for something that the prosecutor would be hard pressed to fairly prove against you anyway. Many codefendants are tricked this way into offering testimony in exchange for lighter sentences or in some cases even total immunity for crimes they helped commit.

One essential thing to understand is that the sincere looking White attorney who is supposed to defend and protect your rights is in fact a "sworn officer of the court." They are bound by some oath of judicial fealty of which you know absolutely nothing

about. "Why, you'll never see the light of day! Take the deal! It's a good deal. With time off for good behavior you'll be back out in a few years," the smooth talking, reassuring White face says. The dockets are full. They are no more than an amateur actor with mediocre legal abilities. They play their part again and again. It's their job to ensure that the wheels of injustice continue to spin smoothly. They are the golfing buddy of the judge, the cousin of the prosecutor. They may have been a prosecutor themselves once. They lunch together every afternoon. Their children attend the same private schools. They belong to the same clubs, the same lodge, they may even swap spouses. Their allegiances are only to each other and not to you. For those who refuse to take that coveted deal, there will be hell to pay for having the nerve to buck the accepted system of things. You won't be dealt with fairly because you are poor. You will not be afforded a jury of your peers. The legal terms they use are spoken in Latin, a dead (buried and thus hidden) language, only spoken (and kept alive) by priests at the Vatican. Witnesses are coached in what to say. The police intimidate your witnesses to not appear in court. Hand signals are given and passwords are spoken. Objections are over-ruled by the judge with a nod and a sly wink. You sit in the midst of some Masonic ritual taking place. Your silence is assured. You are threatened with exposure of your criminal past (if you have one) if you dare to speak in your own defense. The cards are well-stacked against you and chances are you will go to jail.

Many of us lack a fundamental belief in ourselves; therefore, we lack faith and confidence in the abilities of those professionals of our race to perform accurately when things count most. We feel somehow that their education and training isn't on an equal footing with their White counterparts. We have been brainwashed to assume that a Black attorney isn't capable of competently representing our interests in the White man's court of law. "Now don't you go in there with no nigga' lawyer. Get you a good Jew Lawyer. You go down there with a nigga' lawyer and you'll end up with more time." That is standard advice. By such a notion of "slave wisdom" we fall easy prey into the clutches of the corrupt White attorneys. If we fully understood what we were up against, we would see that no one should represent us other than another Black person. There are many White attorneys who earn their livelihoods extracting pounds of Black flesh inside America's-halls of injustice. They continuously deal Black lives away by the deft strokes of their pens. They trade in Black bodies as their slave owning forefathers did in the days of old. These attorneys deal cases with the prosecutors and collect bribes when we have the ability to pay. To these White attorneys we are just unsuspecting victims.

Part II
INSIDE

Entering prison for the first time can be a frightening experienced The noise level is what strikes you and it is unlike any noise that you have ever heard before. It's human noise and clamor. That, coupled with the sight of those dreary bars, made me think, "Man, what have I gotten myself into here?!" When you have entered prison,

you have entered a world all its own. Each prison is different. What applies to one prison certainly will not apply to another. Prisons are classified by security levels (Maximum, Close, Medium, Minimum). You will have different rules and types of people according to what kind of prison you find yourself in.

Although each prison is different, there exists three basic groupings in all prisons. This social strata consists of the administration, guards, and the prisoners themselves. Each group operates according to its own set of rules and values, while there exists an interplay between the three, and none being totally independent of the others.

The administrators of prisoners are usually people with years of devoted service in the penal system. Some are educated in the science of penology, but for the most part they are persons who came up through the ranks as guards. After taking a number of college courses, or gaining a degree in some social science, they were granted their positions and titles. At the higher levels of penal administration can be found a bit more educated persons who are more devoted to the penal system. These are the wardens and people who help make policy decisions. In this modern day, they are usually Black people. For those who understand the negative consequences of incarceration, their appointments to those positions can be recognized for what it is, a divisive tactic. Normally, they are no more than mere figureheads who do the system's bidding in oppressing other Black people.

Rules in prison are formulated to either antagonize or placate prisoners, but their main purpose is to control. The guards are the people who enforce the rules. They act as mediators between administrators and prisoners. As prisons and people in them differ, so do guards. Some are real professionals. They respect other human beings. They spend eight hours at their jobs and go home. Others are the worst types of people. Dirt poor and barely literate, they exist in a no man's land between welfare or prison for themselves. They deal in contraband and are capable of brutal acts (including murder) against prisoners. Most are former military people, ex-cops, or people who couldn't qualify for police departments. They thrive on having authority. Some hold memberships in racist organizations and Masonic orders whose roles are to suppress non White people. Suffering psychological problems, their world view is negative, and that is how they generally view most prisoners.

The most difficult part about having contact with prison administrators and guards is that they usually operate from a set of preconceived notions about all prisoners. For them a textbook example of a prisoner is dumb, petty, scheming, and manipulative. Their manuals generally describe all prisoners this way. They tend to lump all prisoners into these categories. Accordingly, it would be safe to lump them all into one category as well. Expect them to be indifferent, authoritative, brutal and racist toward you. When you encounter an administrator or guard who is different, consider it a rarity.

Prisoners come from a variety of backgrounds. Prison is a confined place, packed with living bodies of every shape, color and size. You will find yourself closer to other human beings than you have ever been before, many of whom you won't like. When conditions are crowded, there is a natural tendency for people to band together for mutual protection as well as friendship. Most prisons are divided by groups. These divisions occur along racial, religious, and ideological lines, as well as gang affiliations. The administrators and guards usually know who's who, because they are kept abreast of the inside goings on by their inmate informants.

There exists a class of people who are "at home" inside prison. They were conditioned for prison life from childhood. Starting out in juvenile correctional facilities they later made the transition to youth reformatories and adult prisons. They are totally inept as criminals and have been incarcerated any number of times. They are institutionalized and would rather be in prison than out. By conditioning, prison's safe, controlled environment is best suited to them, a place where they are clothed, fed, and told what to do. Outside life is too difficult to grapple with for these individuals.

For another class of people, prison is a kind of homeless shelter. They don't necessarily want to be in prison, but in a sense they are forced to be. Unskilled, homeless and destitute, they enter jails and prisons for an array of minor crimes to be fed and rested up. Prison gives them a needed break from homelessness and crack addiction. For them a six month to a year sentence is a heavenly blessing. They aren't criminals in the real sense but men and women who have been forced by economic and social conditions to take the easy way out time and time again.

For yet another class of people coming to prison is an occupational hazard. Crime is their vocation and they take coming to prison all in stride. It would be incorrect to type them as institutionalized, because they long for the free world. They make no excuses for what they did and openly discuss what they will do once back out on the streets. They intend to gang bang, rob and peddle dope. Their time inside prison is just an extension of their criminal lives on the outside. Many continue to profit from vices while in prison.

It has been difficult characterizing people in prisons. As previously stated, prisons differ and so people confined in them differ as well. No description of prison has ever been positive because it is a negative place filled with negative personalities who exhibit some abnormal behavior patterns. The variety of criminal offenses that you will find inside prisons are too numerous to list. One thing that usually all prisoners have in common is that they have suffered some kind of abuse in their lives whether it be physical, mental, drug or alcohol related. Penal facilities are in the same class as mental institutions, therefore, you will find persons with mental histories who are prescribed various types of powerful psychotropic medications. The one general rule is to never attempt to apply reason and logic to people or the situations you may encounter. If you look for logic and reason you'll find that you're in the wrong place.

ASSOCIATIONS

In everyday life, whether we find ourselves in jail or out, associations are important. We are often judged by who we associate ourselves with. The old saying, "Birds of a feather flock together" holds true. Because of the close proximity, you will be judged more harshly by your associations by others in prison. We are assumed to be of a particular character or to engage in certain activities by whom we associate ourselves with. Associations are of two types, positive and negative. If we reflect on our pasts, it will usually be seen that our lives took a term for the worst when we began to "hang with the wrong crowd," and it was in that group that we smoked our first reefers, hooked school and began to steal. All behavior is learned, and so was our criminal behavior. As easily as going along with the wrong crowd, we could have sat in the front row of the class with those "A" students who went on to college and later became professionals. Had we made the decision to have positive associations we would not have fallen prey to the negativity that eventually led us to being where we are.

The same choice continues to hold itself out to us daily. One of the first steps toward change and self improvement is to begin to choose positive associations in our prison environment whose influences will benefit us in the long run. One good look around will tell you that there is very little actual thinking going on in our prison environments. The real thinkers are few, and that is what makes them noticeable. You will find these persons taking full advantage of the educational and vocational opportunities made available to them. They use their time wisely preparing themselves for their lives in the free world. These are the best associates, and we can usually benefit from their insights and accept their advice.

A word to the wise. There exists another set of thinkers as well. Because we see someone carrying an armful of books does not mean that their association can always be beneficial. There are individuals who are extremely intelligent but they utilize their energies foolishly in creating friction. Having had problems with authority all their lives, they love to antagonize authority with frivolous grievances and baseless legal claims. They will make themselves (and you by association) targets of official reprisals. The thing to recognize about prison is our vulnerability and so it is best to remain distant from smart people doing stupid things.

There are others who are leaders of gangs and various other factions inside prison. In love with a feeling of power over others, like actors, they play out roles in their own little Godfather movies. They control the drugs, gambling, extortion, and other vices inside prison. Their manipulative abilities are usually honed by years of jailhouse experience. They know all the right buttons to push, and they orchestrate others in doing their bidding. Needless to say, nothing positive may be gained from these associations.

As previously stated, the choices in our associations holds itself out to us daily. I

recognize that peer pressure plays a part, also, especially in a close environment such as prison; however, when most people see a person take a definite stand to do something good, they will usually respect it. The same is true for ourselves. We must take that firm stand to take on associations that are right and in our own best interest.

FAMILY

The importance of the family bond can not be over emphasized. The connections between us and our families need to be strengthened. No matter what the given set of circumstances, family is what we are linked to, not only in name but spiritually as well. After our Creator, family should be our primary source of strength to draw from. If you look around all you see are sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers. We are all linked to a family system, no matter how good or bad. America's slave system was responsible for the destruction of the Black family. The destruction of our families was the first thing that the oppressors did to our people. They sold us off from one another. The same thing is done by the American penal system in this day and age. Prison sells us off from those that we love.

Time and distance plays havoc upon what ties of family that we may have. The reason why most prisons are located in rural areas is not only to provide jobs to impoverished people, but because they isolate (in most cases totally) inner-city Blacks locked up in them from their loved ones. When a person is isolated, they are easier to control. No one is there to question what happens to that person. This allows the racist White authorities to basically have their way.

The State of Ohio is notorious for its program for the destruction of Black family ties. Practically all of Ohio's prisons are located in rural areas. Black prisoners are routinely sent to prisons hundreds of miles away from their homes to render them inaccessible to concerned family members. Limitations are placed on the number of persons who may visit. Conjugal visits are non-existent. Prisoners are given added time to their sentences when they go up for parole. This causes less committed family members to desert their cause. This program of systematic destruction takes place while the State of Ohio hypocritically states that it encourages strong family ties.

Many people in prison have not had the benefit of loving home environments. All along, the State has acted as a surrogate parent. These people are what you would term as being "state raised" from early childhood on. I think it is these persons who make up the bulk of the prison population, at least in Ohio. It is a deliberate crime, and it is unfortunate that we live under a system that conditions people from childhood to be locked up, so that the system can maintain control.

If you have a family or anyone on the outside to support you in any way, then consider yourself very fortunate. Do all that you can to maintain and build upon those relationships. Communication is the key. Regular letters, telephone calls and visits will help. Always report the positive happenings in your life, admit past mistakes and let go of old resentments. Always show your appreciation and love for them, because they need that too. A strong support system can carry you a long way.

TIME UTILIZATION

In doing time in prison, time is the essential factor. Our physical lives are measured by seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years. Time measures our physical lives; therefore, we should begin to measure time and become time conscious. In this way we can utilize our time in prison and work it to our best advantage.

If you look around the prison you are in, you will see a lot of time being squandered. Valuable hours of each day are being wasted senselessly in useless pursuits. There is no harm in recreation, but when entire days are spent playing board games, cards, basketball, and watching television, then priorities have to be questioned.

An objective evaluation must be made of each and every activity that we engage in. We can determine if the activity is beneficial to us by its end results (if we actually benefit from it) and how much of our time is devoted to it. An hour game of cards or chess can be enjoyable and relaxing, but when these games last up to four or five hours, then it has become a waste of time. The same stands true of basketball. (Don't dribble your life away.) None of these recreational pursuits can change our lives or prepare us to be stronger men and women who can go out into the world to face life's challenges.

The most senseless use of time in prison has to be constant television watching. There are adult men in prison who watch cartoons and soap operas for hours each day. They know all the soaps' characters, plots, and can figure all the possible scenarios of upcoming episodes. They live through the tube. They call television the "Boob Tube" because it will make you dumb if you aren't already. Its shameless, naked images will poison your mind and spirit. Its fantasy will rob you of all original creative thinking abilities. Constant television watching develops the dangerous habit of always wanting to be entertained, which causes laziness.

Television is a powerful tool of propaganda also, which is one of the Five P's mentioned earlier. Television is dangerous to Black people (especially children), because it will distort one's self concept with its endless parade of White intellect, beauty and White super heroes. You can not find a better stamp of approval for the notion of White supremacy than television. For a thinking Black person, in general, television is a no, no. Cut out television for one month and you will be surprised at

what you can get accomplished in that time. Knowing how to manage time properly is important in everyday life. When we learn how to get the most out of our days, we will come to know a real sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. There are only twenty four hours in a day. The more you begin to actually do the clearer it becomes that there never is enough time to get things done. Then you will understand the value of time.

Here are some suggestions for successful time management: develop the habit of getting up early. This can be a plus. All that is needed is an alarm clock and a little will power. Think of getting up early as getting a jump on the competition. When the rest of the world is just waking, you'll be up, cleaned, groomed, dressed and already in full motion.

Begin to make daily schedules. Think of yourself as someone with a lot to do but limited time. At night before going to bed, list all you want to do the next day. Keep this list with you and check off things off as you do them during the day. Review the list at night to see what you didn't get done. Put what you didn't do on the list for the next day.

Set short-term and long-term goals. Goals are objectives and life doesn't have much purpose without them. In order to attain your goal, you must formulate a plan. For instance, your short-term goal may be to get a G.E.D. in six months. Your plan to obtain that goal would be to study for a couple of hours a day. Beyond this, your long term goal could be to earn an Associates Degree in two years. As your plan, you would set a pace for your classes in that two year period of time.

Our time in prison should not be wasted. It is time in our lives. This is the best time that we can possibly have to develop ourselves in all ways. We're being fed, clothed and housed (in my case "warehoused"). There are no bills to pay, no job to go to. To gain as much knowledge, awareness and skills as we can should be our primary objective. If the racist system has given you a lot of time, then you should leave prison with a college degree or several good skills. Get the best out of the situation and don't let the situation get the best out of you. This is how to "beat the system" and walk away ahead of things. You can do all of this by learning how to use time effectively.

Part III

Your Mental Health

Prison will destroy you mentally if you allow it to. Being in prison can be one of the most degrading experiences in life. It seems that degradation is the main purpose of prison. Dress codes, serial numbers, buzzers and bells, strip searches, inadequate privacy and lists of rules too long to remember are used as means to humiliate, tear you down and annihilate you psychologically.

Having a strong mind helps one to survive the rigors of prison. This calls for having a positive mental outlook in spite of the circumstances. Prison is a negative place. Probably some of the most negative thinking on the planet takes place inside of prisons. There are many broken people in prison who suffer from defeatism. They have failed in life because they never really try. When they see others attempting to make positive strides, they often criticize but never encourage.

Never count yourself amongst the losers. By keeping a positive outlook you will have the advantage in any situation. It can be quite difficult, but at some point all things face opposition. As prison can be one of the worst possible situations there will be many obstructions to your progress. In developing and keeping a positive mental outlook, you will remove your first and greatest obstacle --yourself.

Having a strong belief in yourself is vitally important. You must believe in yourself, that you can change your condition, that you can be a better human being. Believe that you can get out of prison and be a good father or mother or husband or wife and be a productive part of your community. You must believe in yourself. Hardly anyone else will.

How you see yourself determines how you see the world and others. Having a strong and clear mental image plays an important part in self-development. How do you see yourself? What is your self-concept? If your conception of yourself isn't strong, do you at least have some notion of the kind of individual you wish to become? Consider these things.

Thoughts are powerful. They create and give new life and can cause death. Never allow fear, anxiety, anger and doubt to run riot in your life and exert rulership over you. Negative thinking will defeat you. Be filled with confidence and optimism that problems will be resolved to your benefit. Have thoughts of patience and fortitude. Clear thinking is the best thinking there is.

Worry is the most senseless use of mental energy. I have seen others worry themselves until they become so overwhelmed that they give up all hope. We should not worry over things we have no control over. A pending appeal, a lover, unruly children at home, are things we shouldn't worry about. We have to realize that what is to be will be. You don't want to end-up dependent on some drug like Thorozene for your peace of mind or having some medical problem due to worry. Save yourself a lot of grief. Place focus on the improvement of your mind.

Knowledge is power. There is a vast difference between a learned person and a fool. The more one comes to know the more sensible the person will act. Education is the key. Prison will bestow the precious gift of free time to allow you to obtain knowledge and useful skills. Sublimate your energies toward gaining education and skills that can be used once you are released from prison.

Reading is fundamental. It was once a crime to teach a Black person how to read. The slave holders knew that an educated Black wouldn't make a good slave. This law still exists in its unwritten form. When you look at the low reading levels of Black children and the general condition of mental slavery, we find ourselves in today, it becomes obvious. Valuable knowledge is contained in books. There are books written on every subject. When you desire to know about something, find it in a book. Books can open whole new worlds.

Reading can be a waste of time if you don't know what to read. Books are the plates on which mental food is served. Will you eat a nutritious, well-balanced meal or will it be McDonald's? Will you read a technical book or a comic book? Will you read The Destruction of Black Civilization by Chancellor Williams or Iceberg Slim? Like looking at a menu, the choice is ours as to what we feed ourselves mentally by what we read.

Education without culture will only make an educated slave. Find the truth of history contained in books. Historical reading is the most rewarding and has a profound effect upon the psyche. I recall that when I learned from reading that medicine, mathematics, building and the arts and sciences had their origins in Africa (Egypt), it increased my thirst for knowledge. After reading about it, I was able to relate it to myself. When I finally entered college, I wasn't fooled when the White professor claimed those advances for the Greeks.

Do a great deal of reading to cultivate your mind. Developing a reading program will help. If you're not a good reader, then keep reading and you will surely improve. Never be intimidated by the number of pages in a book. Start with short books and work your way up. A steady diet of two books a week can't help but improve you.

Your Physical Health

Prison will destroy you physically if you allow it to. It would seem that is its purpose, to make you grow old, run you down, and cause you to suffer from ill health. Knowing some steps to take a protect your physical being will help you get through prison.

Prison is a dirty place. Most prisons are old. Some date as far back as the Civil War period. The drab conditions of buildings and over-crowding make prison a fertile environment for pests, rodents and diseases transmitted by human contact.

Physical cleanliness is essential. Always be clean and groomed. This is the first step in keeping yourself healthy while in prison. Personal cleanliness enhances self-esteem; plus, it makes a positive statement to others about you.

Concentrate on the total cleanliness of your immediate living environment (bed area, cell, etc.). Always keep dirt and dust to a minimum. Now I'm sure at some point in our lives most of us have had some contact with those "brown cousins" and prisons are full of them. But, learn to be intolerant of roaches. If you roll over and see one crawling up the wall at three in the morning, then get up and kill it! Along with rodents, they carry all kinds of diseases.

Physical contact is nearly impossible to avoid because of the close proximity of others. Probably one of the first things you will realize in prison is that everyone isn't clean. Some people are just downright funky. Besides filthy habits and bad personal odors, common diseases carried by others could range from TB to A.I.D.S. When it comes to T.B., watch what you touch and never drink or smoke after anyone. If you're in a cell with someone else, then keep a window cracked at all times to maintain an air flow. Avoid constant coughers.

Abstain from the use of cigarettes, coffee and all drugs. Those things are bad for us health-wise. Besides that, you don't want anything that is habit forming, something that you just "gotta' have" the first thing each morning. The use of habitual things robs us of our independence. We need to develop independent thinking for when we get out. Habits stifle growth toward independence.

Food is life. Most food in prison isn't food at all but what I call "filler." It has no real life substance in it and is used to fill your belly and keep you quiet and complacent. It comes canned and dehydrated, then usually gets boiled beyond taste or fried. The meat is usually ground up because of its inferior quality. Lots of potatoes and plenty of pork. Pork is the worst meat for human consumption because it's full of parasites. You'll find that because of the food people in prison suffer from many stomach ailments. As a general rule, eat less and you will be better off.

Fresh air and sunlight is essential to life. If you have access to movement outdoors then stay outside as much as possible, even during the winter months. Get lots of sunshine and breath in as much fresh air as you can. Also, it has been proven that the sun has a positive effect on human emotions and physical health. Physical exercise each day will keep you in good condition and help to relieve stress. One of the best things that we can do is stretch. Stretching keeps the body flexible. Some form of martial art would be beneficial. Prison can be an unpredictable place. Anything could happen, so it's best to keep yourself at ready.

Getting proper rest at night is important. Prison can preserve your youthful features, because you aren't constantly on the go as free persons are. You can walk out of prison not having aged much physically. Proper rest with regular exercise and a good diet will carry you through. Always get a good night's sleep.

Your Spiritual Health

Prison will destroy you spiritually if you allow it to. The experience of being locked up can make you bitter beyond compassionate feelings for other human beings. You can easily lose what moral values you have in prison. The prevalence of evil and vice inside prison can rob you of your spiritual life if you are unaware. People are composed of mind, body and spirit (or soul). The three are connected and form life as we know it. We know that mind exists because we think most of the time. We are certain of our bodies because we see it and have the sense of touch. But what about the spirit or soul? When we become better attuned to ourselves we know of its existence, because we "feel" it.

The knowledge of the existence of a spirit or soul that exists after bodily death, to face a judgment was common to our African ancestors. The Africans of Egypt were one of the first known people to promulgate the belief in the soul and a judgment with heaven or hell as a reward for earthly deeds. These beliefs had at some point become common to most of humanity but was always central to African life.

A focal point in African life was the belief in one divine Creator of all things. In fact, the first known purely monotheistic religion had its origins in Egypt, that which today is known as Judaism. Some African nations worshipped many deities, but even then there was always one supreme god who stood head and shoulders above all the rest. Belief was the essential theme of our forefathers' lives and should remain as the main theme of ours as well. When we became so "logical" (or embittered) that we deny the existence of our Creator and our own souls, then we have lost touch with our natural selves and our humanity. A strong sense of belief in the Creator will help us face life's challenges.

Constant prayer is the essence of spiritual life. It is man's way of calling upon and giving praise to the one great force of all the worlds. Whatever name we choose to call Him, be it "Allah" or "Yahweh" or "Jehovah," we must know that He is even above names. He is the Most High and He is One. Being consistent in supplication acts as a reminder and keeps us within the bounds of upright conduct. Prayer helps us to understand our relationship to our Creator and to other human beings. Prayer is the spiritual food that nourishes the human spirit.

Charity is a means of fulfilling our duties to our fellow human beings. If our Creator is one, then His creation is one as well; therefore, it becomes our duty to act for the welfare of others, to want for others what we wish for ourselves. If we desire peace, security and happiness, then we should always extend those things to others. It is better to give than to receive. There are blessings in giving and, when we give, we will always find that we still always have enough for ourselves. A smile, a kind word, encouragement and a helping hand are all forms of charity.

Fasting is a way of purifying ourselves. By short periods of fasting, we can rid our systems of toxins, develop inner-discipline and focus our attention toward our spiritual selves. Fasting not only places us in contact with our spiritual essence but grants us at least a momentary mastery over the desire for food. It will also grant us an exact understanding of the deprivation that others in the world now suffer daily and evoke feelings of empathy within us.

Pilgrimage is a form of spiritual migration. It is a way of transcending beyond the cell, the fences and walls, those man-made barriers which stand between us and physical freedom. To perform a spiritual migration each day is to know true freedom. We all need a spiritual link to something, be it a church, temple, mosque or a distant place. It would be helpful to have persons in those places who pray daily for our well-being. It is in those directions that we should place our attention and travel spiritually each day.

Each one of us has the right to believe as we choose. Let there be no compulsion in matters of religion. Religion is social. Its purpose is to bring people together before the Creator, but most often it divides them. On the other hand, spirituality is personal. It is how we relate to our Creator and how we live. Spirituality lies deep within.

In attempting to make this book as readable as possible, I have sought a way around the issue of religion because I wished to address spiritual well-being and not get into differences. It then occurred to me as I was writing that the reader could hold no religious beliefs whatsoever; therefore, the subject then became unavoidable to my way of thinking. So the remainder of this is devoted to religion purely from my perspective, which condemns no one else.

Islam is a beautiful religion and a total way of life. The religion transformed me and molded me into being a better human being. I sought out the truth for myself. I asked questions, read, studied and made comparisons. Never in my life have I accepted anything without investigation. I encourage everyone else to do the same, especially when it comes to religion, because it is such a serious matter.

There are many reasons why I accepted Islam, and here are some of them. Its scripture (the Holy Quran) was easier for me to read than the Bible had been. The principles of the religion were simple. Islam teaches that we are not to worship things or men and that Allah (The Creator) is One. It places a heavy emphasis on moral and physical cleanliness with the Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and his Sunnah (way) as the best example.

Perhaps the biggest reason why myself and others choose Islam is it gives a sense of cultural identity that most Black people in this country seek. The continent of Africa is populated by Muslims, so it aligns me with Africa. Islam is the largest religion on the earth. There are nearly one billion Muslims of all nationalities and colors, and so I am now able to identify with them too. Islam has restored in me a human identity.

The religion of Islam is the most active force in the world today. It is the perfection of all religion, as the Holy Quran teaches. If you find yourself locked in a spiritual battle, trying to fight against weaknesses and addictions, then try Islam as a way of living. The best thing about Islam is that it is open to be investigated and tried by anyone! Its easy principles (belief, prayer, charity, pilgrimage and fasting) were basically expounded upon in this book for spiritual health and well-being.

Conclusion

As I read over the pages of this book, I find that much has been left out. There were things that didn't come to mind as I was writing, but let this effort suffice. In writing this book, it has been my sincere desire that it will help someone to better their life. No matter what the condition or circumstance, one can live a cleaner and fuller life and become a better human being. I hold myself out as my best example.

Over the years, prison has changed me, but little has changed about prison. There are the same sights, sounds, and I hear the same voices. I see many of the same faces returning time and time again. Other faces have become much younger. What all the faces seem to share in common is a lack of hope written in them.

I generally have compassion for people, and so I have often pondered over what I could do to motivate others. My attempts at sharing my insights have usually encountered strong resistance on a personal level. Writing this book has been my best answer.

We live in an era where our people are being locked up in staggering numbers. It seems as if we are all under lock and key. In this process of genocide, we are losing our most valuable resource -- our youths. If reading this book makes a difference for one of us, then this humble endeavor has been realized, and I thank Allah. I hold a strong belief in change.

Abdullah Ibraheem is a 41-year-old writer still serving time. He has written many other things including books, short stories, and plays. If you have questions or comments, you can contact him at Abdullah Ibraheem Box 45699
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The Boston Anarchist Black Cross functions as the defensive arm of local anarchist struggles. We work to forge an organized support network for local activists in need and for folks behind bars. We seek the total abolition of prisons and work on projects in support of this cause.

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