



Escape from the Inner Prison

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In a maximum-security California prison, Lisa, an inmate serving a life sentence, was doing her best to connect with her son during the fifteen minutes per day allotted for phone calls. Her son was having a number of personal challenges, and in the course of their discussion, they got into a fight, and he hung up. She learned the next day that her son had committed suicide following that phone call. Lisa was shocked, depressed, and

grieving deeply. This went on for several weeks, and Lisa's friends became increasingly concerned for her, urging her to get medications to treat her depression. Lisa had a belief that people who commit suicide go to hell, and she couldn't bear the thought of her son "burning in hell." Lisa had gone as far as getting enough heroin (all too easily acquired in prison) to end her life. She didn't want to take medication. She told her friends during the intervening

months that she could “hold on” until the next *Freedom to Choose* workshop. She believed that would be the best place to find the support she needed to heal the grief of her son’s suicide.

Freedom to Choose

The name of the *Freedom to Choose* workshop is derived from the work of Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who was imprisoned in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany.

Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is the power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom. —Viktor Frankl

Thousands of lives have been positively influenced in response to one person courageously asking for help. *Freedom to Choose* workshops began in response to a letter sent in 2003 to the president of the University of Santa Monica (USM) from Rhonda, a woman serving a life sentence at Valley State Prison for Women. At that time, Valley State Prison for Women was a medium- to maximum- security facility, housing approximately 3,800 female inmates with crimes ranging from simple possession of a controlled substance to prostitution to property crimes to murder. Rhonda wrote, “The

majority of women who come to prison dream of becoming self-sufficient individuals who are not dependent on society or the prison system.” Her request was a simple one: she asked for someone to give a talk on self-esteem to help herself and her fellow inmates.

As university faculty members, we heard about Rhonda’s request and answered a clear inner call to volunteer by organizing and cofacilitating an experimental workshop. Originally designed by the university, we adapted the materials so they would be suitable for the educational level and life experiences of the women in the prison. What resulted is a volunteer service project consisting of a series of highly interactive, experiential workshops based on the same principles and skills taught in USM’s nondenominational master’s-degree program in spiritual psychology. *Freedom to Choose* is starting its tenth year, and it has expanded to parolees and vulnerable populations in the “free world” (as the inmates call it). We have received several awards for this work, including the Local Hero Award in 2012 from the Agape International Spiritual Center and Common Peace Center for the Advancement of

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Nonviolence. Learning the skills of effective communication, personal responsibility, conflict prevention, and forgiveness are useful in day-to-day life, but for women incarcerated at one of the largest medium- to maximum- women’s prisons in the world, they take on the importance of true survival skills. In the *Freedom to Choose* workshops, participants learn skills to achieve the essence of Viktor Frankl’s work: choosing one’s own attitude, regardless of circumstances.

Freedom to Choose is based on the principle that each of us is an incarnation of Spirit, and, therefore, everyone is inherently worthy of love and respect. In our experience of working with thousands of people, we’ve seen that as people open to the awareness of what Ernest Holmes called the “indwelling Presence,” the unconditionally loving nature of this presence

facilitates deep and profound healing. The healing power of God’s love touches all, even in the most challenging circumstances. Opportunities for grace are always present.

Mentors—True Service Serves Everyone

After the initial workshop in March 2004, the most resounding feedback we received from the inmates was, “We want more!” This led to considering how we could accommodate more inmates in the workshop. The workshop processes are done in groups of three, or “trios.” In the original workshop, there was one USM graduate volunteer in each trio who provided modeling and coaching for each of the skills we taught. Practically speaking, we couldn’t expand our team very much, but we wanted to expand the number of inmates we could serve. The idea came forward to seed the trios with inmate graduates of the beginning workshop. This led us to design an advanced workshop for those graduates to be presented the day prior to the introductory two-day workshop. We also added them to our team of volunteers for the introductory workshop. The inmates who completed an advanced workshop became mentors, and

they turned out to be eager, enthusiastic members of the volunteer team. They distributed handouts, organized seating, and passed the microphone for sharing. They were very effective in the trios, supporting the new inmate participants in learning the tools to become free from the inner prison; at the same time, they were working on healing their own issues.

Volunteers—Unconditional Loving in Action

Cultivate a heart of love as wide as the world. —Dr. Michael Bernard Beckwith

We are grateful to have an abundance of volunteers for *Freedom to Choose* workshops at the women's prison, many of whom return year after year. Everyone pays his or her own way, and people travel from all over the country to donate their time and share three days of unconditional loving with like-minded souls. Volunteers frequently characterize this as a "life-altering experience." One described the experience as an opportunity to put into practice in a profound way the principles of spiritual psychology that had so positively impacted her life. We routinely have a waiting list for each workshop.



Volunteer Marcia Bradshaw hugging one of the participants in the *Freedom to Choose* workshop.

When I am home, people ask me what it is like to spend a weekend with the inmates of a maximum-security prison. What are the women like? they ask. My answer has been that they are like you and me. They are like our sisters, our daughters, cousins, aunts, and nieces. It does not take too much imagination to realize how easily, given the right combination of circumstances, any of us could be the person in the prison rather than the visitor. I now see how beautiful these souls are. I see that their path behind the razor wire is as sacred and as meaningful as any path walked by any of us. Joy, I discovered, is where we are, now, in the present moment, no matter who we are or where we are. —Stephen, fourteen-time volunteer

Ordinary Miracles

It was Irene's first time participating in a *Freedom to Choose* workshop. A recent graduate of USM, she had traveled from the East Coast at

her own expense. At lunchtime on her first day, Irene felt a bit shy as she surveyed the crowded prison Visitor's Center where the workshop was held. She silently prayed, "Spirit, show me where to sit." Her eyes landed on a woman in the yard sitting alone. Irene tentatively asked if she could join her. The woman nodded and replied, "My son committed suicide." It was Lisa. Irene said, "I know this is going to sound strange, but it's no accident I'm sitting next to you." She went on to share with Lisa about a book she was writing—one of the chapters was about a friend of hers who had committed suicide. Would Lisa like to hear Irene's perspective? Lisa said yes. Irene shared her point of view that God is unconditionally loving and that, rather than punishment, the purpose of life is for learning, and this grace is also extended to those souls who commit suicide. Irene said to Lisa, "It takes a lot of courage to question beliefs we've held for a long time. And, according to what I've learned, hell isn't a place. It's a state of consciousness. So is heaven. And we can choose to create either, right here and now." By the end of their conversation, Lisa had opened her eyes to another possibility beyond that which she had seen before. Through Irene's

open-hearted sharing, Lisa experienced a moment of grace.

This is one of the many synchronicities that seem commonplace at *Freedom to Choose* workshops, though no less thrilling each time they occur. For all involved, they offer tangible evidence of the ever-presence of God's love and a potent reminder that, as Ernest Holmes said, "Any person may become a revealer of Truth."

At the end of the advanced workshop that day, Lisa stood before the group of 175 people to share what she had learned. She told us of the pain she had endured, and how she'd held on, knowing deep inside that today would bring an important piece of the healing she was seeking. She said that she understood that she was not responsible for her son's choice, and that ending her own life would solve nothing. She said she experienced true self-forgiveness for the first time in her life on that day, and she shared that she started to experience a glimmer of peace about her son's choice to end his life, even though she didn't agree with it.

A Ministry of Fierce Grace

At age sixty-six, Ram Dass, a contemporary spiritual teacher, unexpectedly experienced a debilitating stroke that he



Bonnie and David Paul at a Freedom to Choose workshop.

came to call “fierce grace.” He is reported to have said, “Trauma is a path to God” when describing his experience of this stroke. In his words, “When we are able to get to our souls, where we can see things as God sees them, we experience our lives as grace.” Several years after Lisa and Irene’s synchronistic meeting, Lisa had taken a leadership role in the *Freedom to Choose* workshop and was assisting us with logistics to support her peers. While the rest of the group was engaged in an exercise, we talked with her. She said that she had something she wanted to share with us, and she brought out a large quilt, carefully spreading it out on a table in front of us. In the usual style of quilts, it was a series of squares, multicolored and extraordinarily beautiful. We marveled at how she had manifested the materials for such a magnificent creation in prison! As she lovingly stroked various squares, she told us the tale of the quilt. She reminded us that she had created a

support group at the prison for women who were “survivors of suicide” (SOS), meaning that someone they loved had committed suicide. There was understandably tremendous grief and also a great deal of shame among the women in this group, and her mission was to give them a place to share and heal, passing along the same pivotal gift she had received several years earlier. We learned that Irene had donated her now-published books to this group along with the supplies to make the quilt, which glittered with vibrant colors and sparkly embellishments. Lisa told us that the quilt honored the loved ones of the SOS group members who had died. She touched various squares, telling us which one honored her son and which ones honored children of group members. We were especially moved by a square dedicated to a high school across the country where a record number of teen suicides had occurred. Looking at the quilt brought tears to our eyes. Rather than suffering, we experienced overflowing love. We were deeply touched by how Lisa had transformed her tragedy into a ministry. Truly, this was fierce grace in action. ■

To learn more, visit freedomtochoose.net.

REVEALING HEALTH Courageous Living and Loving

The road map to the fountain of youth and living longer? Seeing yourself as you really are—divine, creative, beautiful, perfect in every way—serves to optimize overall mind-body biological function. A positive picture of yourself encourages a healthy, harmonious response of the parasympathetic nervous system. Self-acceptance will help you manage the stress hormone cortisol, which when left unchecked promotes fast-forward aging, compromises the immune system, encourages weight gain, depresses mood, and increases your risk for heart disease.



JAMES ROUSE

Courageously letting go of your false story of unworthiness is a grace-filled practice of fearlessly recognizing your true self. This is how you truly come alive. It is that highly attractive place where your confidence is soaring, your mind is full of inspiring thoughts, your actions are powerful, and your energy reflects a transcendent quality of love. How do you get to this place? Identify what makes you happy; write it down. Consistently find ways to reinforce the feeling and the vision of loving yourself unconditionally. Cultivate an enjoyable practice of self-care. Embrace eating whole foods as a way of nurturing your grace and self-confidence. Shun mediocrity. Fill up on vegetables and fruits, and pass on dessert. Exercise daily with reckless abandon and move naturally. Dance, dig, run, climb, hike, explore, and sweat your prayers outdoors. Give thanks for the opportunity to move.

Forgive yourself and others. Letting go of resentment, past or present, frees you up to grow. Choose to “outlove” any mistake that you have held against yourself and others. Live by design. If your intention is to be healthy, do healthy things. If it is to be peaceful, be and do what brings you peace. Fearlessly protect and keep agreements about the life you have set for yourself. Remember that you are alive to the degree that you serve. Loving yourself is an act of service that will inspire the world around you.

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