

# Reason to Change



I remember the exact moment when I was shown with a few words how bleak my future would be if I didn't change my ways. It wasn't the words that stood out as being my impetus to change so much as it was who they came from.

At twenty years old and three years into a life sentence, I found myself at Wallens Ridge State Prison, one of Virginia's two supermax prisons. Being young and hard-headed, it didn't take long until I started clashing with the guards and found myself in segregation after an assault on a guard with a weapon.

At Wallens Ridge, oppression hangs heavy in the air, and there is constant tension between the guards and inmates. This is due to the guards' wanton abuse of authority and inmate's unwillingness to comply with orders.

Being in segregation, I was around the worst of the guards that worked there, and on a daily basis, I watched them terrorize inmates. In retaliation for writing complaints against guards, inmates would be denied food for days on end, and I have witnessed inmates who were handcuffed and shackled get thrown to the floor where they were beaten for "resisting."

All of that fosters hatred, and I started standing up to them alongside any other inmate who did the same, and I would encourage other inmates to stand up as well. This led the guards to hate me as much as I started to hate them.

After three years of fighting with the guards and in response to a forced cell entry, I was put on "rec. and shower alone" in an attempt to isolate me as much as possible. Forced cell entries are used when an inmate refuses to be handcuffed and exit a cell. The guards will put on full riot gear, then spray tear gas into the cell before they rush into the cell in an attempt to subdue the inmate by any means necessary. It is violence personified and usually ends with the inmate beaten and bloody.

After about a month being on "rec. and shower alone," a guard opened the gunport in the control booth above me and said, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

I had no idea what he was talking about and said as much. My first thought was that he was talking about the intensity of the workout routine that I was doing.

The guard then asked me what I thought was going to happen as a result of the way I was acting. Again, I had no idea what he was talking about. I figured that since I was already in seg., there was nothing more that could be done to me.

This guard proceeded to tell me that what would happen is the administration would decide that I would never be let out of seg. and one day as I was fighting with the guards they would “accidentally” kill me.

More was said but nothing else mattered. It was those words that hit home like nothing had before. Not necessarily because of the words themselves, because my family had told me much the same before. Those words hit home because of who they came from. I couldn’t fathom why a guard, whom I could only assume hated me, would attempt to give me good advice.

So I thought about what he said for days. I looked back at the things I was doing and attempted to see them from his point of view. It was like I had been wearing blinders and they had finally been removed. The ramifications of my actions became evident, and I made the decision to change.

Modifying my behavior was not an easy process, and it began with learning how to care again. After being sentenced to life in prison. I quickly quit caring about anything and it was both a blessing and a curse. The absence of emotion allowed me to stand up to the guards and fight with them. Because, in my head, there was no longer anything that could be done to me. Unfortunately, not caring ~ 18 ~ ing also shielded me from seeing how my actions affected my family. Not caring

becomes a habit like smoking or biting ones fingernails, and it takes time to break yourself out of it.

For a few days after that conversation, I paced the cell thinking, and talking to myself trying to figure out what to do, I quickly came to the realization that my actions were an indicator of immaturity and the selfishness that comes with it. So in order to change, I realized that I had to grow up.

It ended up being easier than I expected. More than anything else, simply making the conscious decision to change was enough. In the moments when relapse was near, I thought of the conversation with that guard and how my actions would affect my family. I couldn’t stand to hear the disappointment in my mother’s voice anymore and it started bothering me to know that I was letting her down, and I realized that I didn’t want to be that person anymore.

It took about a year from the day of that conversation until I was released from seg and I haven’t looked back. My relationships with family are better and now I have as much freedom as possible under the circumstances.

The path to maturity that I took isn’t one that I would recommend to most people. Fortunately, it worked for me at a time when I don’t think anything else would have. ▲