

*From: Steve Brooks [REDACTED]
San Quentin State Prison
4-N-39up
San Quentin, CA. 94974
Essay: 1500 words*

July 1, 2021

Brief Bio: My name is Steve Brooks. I am a member of San Quentin Journalism Guild and a contributing writer for the Prison journalism project. I have written several published articles; two of them were recognized by the Northern California Society Of Professional Journalism. The following essay was written during the pandemic and seeks to encourage incarcerated people to reimagine their incarceration as an opportunity to become better people.

FINDING WELLNESS WHILE IN PRISON

Serving time in prison can be a traumatic experience. This year marks my 26th anniversary. When I entered the prison system I was twenty-three years old. I didn't know what to expect. I started out in a level four maximum security facility at Corcoran -- one of the most dangerous prisons in California. At the time lawmakers had abandoned the goal of rehabilitation, and decided to warehouse us all until we died.

It was the beginning of the tough on crime era. Convicted criminals were coming into the system with extremely long sentences and there was an unwritten no parole policy. Construction of new prisons were on the rise and they were filling up fast. Gymnasiums were being turned into make-shift dormitories with triple bunk beds lined from wall to wall. Dayroom programs were cancelled to make more space for beds. There were very few self-help groups, limited education, vocational trades and job opportunities. The California prison system was not concerned about a prisoner's wellness.

Most incarcerated people had nothing to do except hang out in the prison yard and work out. There would be 200-300 of us standing around, segregated by race, occupying different areas of the yard. Rival gangs would be seated across from each other. The yard was always crowded and full of tension.

Oftentimes, people were preparing for war. You couldn't find much peace. There were lots of fights over territory, disrespect, and illegal hustling. There were stabbings, murders, and suicides. There were riots and gang malays. My stress and anxiety levels went through the roof.

In prison almost everyone is a gang member. Even the guards who patrol the yards operate like a gang. Gang violence, assaults on officers, and riots are the norm. Being non affiliated with any gang kept me paranoid. I did my best to blend in and I listened more than spoke.

There were lots of lockdowns. Some lasted several months to several years. This led to greater discomfort. There'd be no yard exercise, no visits or phone calls, no canteen or packages. We showered once every three days. When I had to leave the cell I was strip searched then escorted around in handcuffs- like a dog on a leash. Sometimes I was paraded around while chained to other prisoners.

In my early years, I spent a lot of time complaining about the lack of program activities and the small amounts of cold nasty food prisons serve. I complained about having my cell searched and destroyed; having my legal work and family photos thrown everywhere. I remember days of sitting outside in the searing heat or the blistering cold, for hours, handcuffed and dressed in my underwear. When I would return to the cell I'd find my property in a pile on the floor. Incidents like this fueled my anger and frustration until I decided I had enough and I let it all go.

When a person comes in contact with the prison system, they're disconnected from their own humanity. You internalize this narrative that you don't matter. You internalize the idea that you are considered to be scum and that you'll always be that horrible person who committed that crime 20, 30, or 40 years ago. Over the years prison caused me to internalize more misery, anger, pain and trauma. It has overwhelmed my senses. I have been in prison so long that when I lay down to go to sleep at night, my dreams are about prison.

They say the goal of prison is to restore a moral balance by punishing the offender. And punishment has been extended to every aspect of my daily existence. I have had to search deeply within myself to find the strength to go on. That's when I realized that the real goal of prison is to break my spirit. No matter what prison I've been to I've internalized hatred being generated towards me. I have internalized loneliness, isolation, worthlessness and hopelessness. I've internalized brokenness.

How does depriving someone of their basic human need for self- esteem and connection restore a moral balance? How is this supposed to create societal wellness? I've often wondered.

When many of us came to prison, we were already broken, full of trauma, and pain that had been inflicted upon us during our lives. Many of us were verbally, physically and sexually abused.

Many of us had been abandoned by our parents, or lost them to tragedy—pushing us into a broken foster care system. We endured poverty and homelessness. We witnessed domestic violence. We were victims of racism, slavery and oppression. We were already suffering from trauma, addiction, and mental illness. This collision course between self and the prison is not treatment, but a double assault upon humanity.

Prisons weren't designed to promote wellness. To find wellness, incarcerated people must recognize the power they have to change their conditions. We can find solutions to stopping the cycle of pain and trauma being inflicted as we collide with the prisons. To do this, incarcerated people have to find their voice. We must pursue education, find and create healthy communities inside these institutions. We must change the perception of prison and find ways to connect ourselves to the greater society. We must become teachers, tutors, and mentors to other incarcerated people and communities at large.

To find wellness while in prison, we must learn to harness our pain and trauma and turn it into a source of power that helps combat the negative psychological effects of prison.

Prisons can offer an opportunity for wellness, if we change our perception of the outcomes we seek. For the addict, prison offers an opportunity to get off drugs. For the mentally ill it offers an opportunity to get treatment. It offers the opportunity to get an education. And prison offers many of us an opportunity to become more conscious of our need to be more healthy and responsible.

In prison, we get an opportunity to see the world from a different perspective and through the lens of different cultures. Prison is one of the few places where many of us can actually get to resolve the pain and trauma that occur in our lives. It's one of the few places where we actually get to learn about emotional intelligence; where we can learn how to think about what we're thinking and how those thoughts make us feel and what triggers us to action. Prison is a place where we can learn coping skills and how to put different tools in our toolbox for managing the different adversities we face in life. For many of us, sadly, prison actually saved our lives.

I personally found wellness in prison because of education. I studied religion. I studied law. I studied philosophy and history. I spent a lot of my time studying how to fight for my freedom. I appealed my conviction. I filed complaints against abusive officers; against racist policies and cruel and unusual conditions. This helped me learn how to fight for myself in healthier ways.

I also learned how to endure psychological trauma by reading a lot of underdog stories about individuals who overcame adversity. I read poems like 'Unconquerable' by Invictus. I read about the story of Job in the bible. I learned that "We are not disturbed by things, but by the view we take of them." And I started to define my own circumstances, telling myself what is real, until it

became real in its consequences. This helped reshape my perception. Now I am of the view that the bigger the test prison presents for me the more resilient I become . I use my pain and trauma to work for me rather than against me.

So for me wellness is about being able to look past my current circumstances and condition to a more promising future. It means having hope in the things I cannot see and faith in the process of achieving what I want to achieve. It means believing that tomorrow will be better and that I will be better. It means rejecting the current narrative about prisoners and surrounding myself with positive people. I am now self-determined, emotionally intelligent, and driven toward self-actualization.

Today, I am a contributing writer for the San Quentin newspaper and the Prison Journalism Project. I practice yoga and meditation. I run marathons. I do public policy work fighting to change the narrative about incarcerated people and fighting to end mass incarceration in America. I am a Teaching Assistant helping design curriculums for Sociology. I have finished two AA degrees and I'm working on my B.A.. I found my pathway to wellness.

Each and everyone of us can find our pathway to wellness. We can become better people, reshaping both ourselves and our society. By developing a healthy perception of life and connecting to the society which created us, we can gain the power to overcome any adversity and to achieve wellness.