

The Sextant



Navigating Your World

IX.XXVIII.MMXII

SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY REENTRY STARTS WITH CLEANING UP *LIFE BAGGAGE*

I continue to be astonished that an individual who enters prison with consumer credit problems, garnishments, civil judgments, delinquent student loans, delinquent taxes, delinquent child support, expired, suspended, or revoked driver licenses, open traffic violations, open warrants, taxation compliance issues, etc. is exiting prison years later with the exact same life baggage with which they entered. And, in most cases the circumstances have been exacerbated.

People are released from prison with no instruction on how to address these issues, let alone a deliberate program that provides instruction and resources to resolve these problems before release.

In many circumstances, individuals secure employment only to have their entire paycheck garnished to pay fines, bureau of motor vehicles penalties, child support, etc., and are left with little to provide for their own subsistence.

In some states, an individual who has any outstanding fines that are payable to the bureau of motor vehicles cannot

receive their driver's license, which substantially handicaps the individual's ability to secure employment and provide for their own subsistence, which is prerequisite so they can continue working and pay the fines. Thus, because of a \$250.00 bureau of motor vehicles fine, government agencies that are not coordinating with departments of corrections exponentially increases the likelihood of recidivism at a cost to the taxpayer of over \$30,000 per year per recidivist.

In many states, child support is also tied to an individual's driver's license, and payment delinquency can result in the suspension of an individual's license. Should the individual drive under suspension, it can result in an administrative or parole violation, or even a new case.

It is difficult to rationalize the economic case of incarcerating an individual at a cost of more than \$30,000 per year because his economic hardship caused him to fall behind a few hundred, or even a few thousand dollars on child support. With such overwhelming challenges, how can an individual ever hope to pursue a normal lifestyle?

Fundamental to solving problems is organization. When a person is faced with compounding issues that continue to escalate in intensity and severity, the individual frequently becomes consumed and overwhelmed.

There is no systematic and disciplined agenda in place within our correctional institutions that methodically addresses the most important issues an individual needs to resolve before release, thereby insuring a streamlined reintegration into the community.

As mentioned, many people are released from prison today with the same *Life Baggage* they carried into prison xx years prior, i.e., child support and consumer credit delinquencies, tax compliance issues, civil litigation and judgments, driver's license suspensions or expirations, no directional goals, no

listing of social organizations that can help, open warrants, little or no education or trade skills, etc.

If a person's life baggage is not deliberately reorganized with specific solutions to resolve each individual issue, these individuals are instantly overwhelmed upon release. If an individual hopes to change their life direction and enjoy a successful community reentry, it is paramount to resolve your life baggage before you are released, or at least have a very definitive plan to get it resolved expeditiously upon your release.

As opposed to the many pre-release programs I have witnessed in our corrections system, very few employ a nuts-and-bolts practical agenda to help people get their life baggage cleaned up, and open issues resolved or at least organized so they can be resolved upon release.

The ex-offender reentering the community needs income. However, if they have open consumer credit, judgments and liens, Bureau of Motor Vehicles fines, or child support delinquencies, despite working hard and securing gainful employment, their income can be garnisheed. In such circumstances, an individual is left with inadequate income to provide for their own subsistence.

When the ex-offender's need is immediate, the reaction might be to treat the symptom with an instant gratification action – a criminal act. Conversely, if proper planning took place well in advance of release, the person's life baggage would be identified, and each issue would have a plan and an approved solution implemented.

The instant gratification impulse should be seen as a danger signal. Usually, only symptoms are treated with instant gratification actions, but the problems that are the root cause of the symptoms are rarely eradicated.

Our desire for instant gratification is an interesting phenomenon. The American culture has been influenced substantially by corporate America to accepting instant gratification as a lifestyle, almost an entitlement, and it has certainly become an expectation. Visa, MasterCard, technological advances, the Internet, microwave ovens, instant mashed potatoes, fast food, and on and on. These all provide instant gratification.

As a society, we have become very accustomed to expecting everything instantly. You can go to a car dealership, give them your Social Security number and within an hour, drive out in a new car. Prior to the exposure of predatory lending (*circa 2008*), if you could steam a mirror, you could get a mortgage on a six-figure house based upon *stated income* – income that is completely unverified.

Clearly, some of this loose credit had contributed to the economic challenges facing the nation during 2008 – 2009. However, my point is that our entire culture has become impatient, and generally unwilling to invest time and hard work before getting the prize.

Albeit we enjoy many conveniences from the technologies and services that offer instant gratification. However, we have become a very impatient society as well, and in many respects, this is detrimental to many people.

As people (*you and me*) who have served time and have the conviction label to conquer, the instant gratification syndrome can create a formidable internal challenge.

We are subject to, and influenced by, the social conditioning that is inherent to our membership in the aforementioned impatient society. We have become accustomed to expecting everything instantly. We need to recognize that this instant gratification conditioning can be a big influence on how we choose our paths toward achieving our goals and objectives.

Moreover, we also need to overcome our own habits and experiences. If a person has had a life of crime, then substantially everything they have accumulated has been by employing criminal or otherwise nefarious schemes.

Here is where you need to be brutally honest with yourself. Look at everything you have accumulated in your life as a whole. What percentage of that whole was accumulated via honest hard work – work that would be considered acceptable within the guidelines of mainstream society?

If that percentage is less than 100%, then simply recognize that you have developed a habit and methodology for achieving objectives or accumulating the things that you want via mechanisms that serve the instant gratification syndrome. There is no need to feel guilty. Our society has conditioned us to expect anything and everything instantly. However, now that we're conscious of the instant gratification conditioning, we can make very deliberate decisions how we feed that habituation.

If you are serving the instant gratification syndrome, then you are not in control of your path or your destiny. Indeed, the instant gratification syndrome is controlling you. If you genuinely want a life of legitimacy, then this is a habit that we will need to modify, which I address in more detail in my book, *Slaying the Dragon – The Journey from the Dungeon to the Ivory Tower* – offered for free five times each quarter on Amazon.

For now, just internalize the realization that a habit does exist that is controlling what you do and how you do it, and that you are serving the habit as opposed to having a habit that serves you. As long as a person continues to serve their desire for instant gratification, they will likely continue to experience havoc in their life.

With respect to making a successful reentry into mainstream society, success is clearly enhanced for the person who has made the conscious choice to embrace legitimacy toward a life of normalcy, and has organized their life direction, *life baggage*, and made a deliberate plan to follow upon release. The person who is just going to walk out the gate and *wing-it* is likely to chase after the instant gratifications to resolve the symptoms that are chasing after them.

If you are released from prison, the system owes you nothing.

An incarceration event is not a valid reason to expect entitlements. You have simply been given a new opportunity to change your life path. The direction of that path and its resultant destinations are your choice. People are well advised to look at a prison sentence as an opportunity to turn their life around as opposed to a punishment.

Whether you want one or not, your life is going to be a journey. The destinations of your journey are solely dependent upon the choices you make. No, it's not easy – it's hard. ...initially. It does however get easier.

A necessary component to realizing any achievement is the pre-planning phase. Before you begin your journey, we can stack the deck in your favor. We can do a little planning to make sure you are as well-equipped as possible to start heading in the general direction of success.

Before you are released, you can begin the process of cleaning up your "*Life Baggage.*"

The day that you are released, you ideally want to have a clean slate. The issues that you had before going to prison may have been perceived by you as one big problem that was completely overwhelming.

That one big problem was a collection of many different small problems. Nevertheless, in many cases, your *Life Baggage* probably contributed to your demise at least to some degree.

Resolving *Life Baggage* requires that you first separate your issues into individual problems, as discussed previously. Many people carry an enormous number of individual problems that homogenize into a single overwhelming and devastating anchor.

Logically, the only reason a person develops an accumulation of problems is because they do not address and solve their problems as each problem surfaces. Ignoring problems is the root cause of *Life Baggage*. If a person has two or more problems, it is because they have not solved the first, second, third and so on.

The process of making a successful reintegration into mainstream society and pursuing a successful future is not a leisurely stroll – it is a marathon! It is not possible to run a marathon if you're carrying a bag full of bricks.

If you take the time to really examine and develop a list of the individual problems that collectively form your *Life Baggage*, you will then be capable of addressing each problem individually and solving the entire collection. It requires time, patience, and effort. Once all of your *Life Baggage* is resolved, you will be starting anew with a clean slate.

If you begin with a clean slate, then you will only be facing and conquering today's challenges that present themselves as you pursue your journey, as opposed to carrying around yesterday's challenges as well.

The future does not equal the past. Your future can be whatever you decide you want it to be. Your future and its

benefits or consequences will be directly proportional to the effort you are willing put forth to achieve any dream or goal you wish to attain.

Another major ingredient to your success will be your commitment to persevere, and never quit, just because it gets a little tough.

If you are in prison, you need to begin cleaning up your life baggage the day you arrive – not just 90 to 180 days before release.

If you work in corrections and reentry preparation, consider implementing programs that genuinely prepare individuals to reenter the community with zero baggage, so they can focus on the future and moving forward, not on the past.

Identify each problem and create an individual plan to solve each problem.

Just as one example, take a person who has a suspended driver's license because of delinquent child support payments. Just for round numbers, let's say they are \$10,000 delinquent.

A sensible and realistic plan upon release would be to agree to a payment plan that is zero dollars per month for the first six months. That gives the person time to get reestablished, find gainful employment and provide for their own subsistence.

For the second six months, the plan would provide a payment of \$150.00 per month. For the next six months, the plan would provide for a payment of \$300.00 per month. The next six months, a payment of \$500.00 per month.

At this juncture, the individual will have been out in the community and working for two and a half years. The payments would continue to scale up until the delinquent

balance is paid, and then the person would simply remain current.

If a person is genuinely dedicated to pursuing a legitimate life and committed to continuously creating a *new most recent significant event*, then their income will be scaling up as well.

If the recipient of the child support is agreeable to such a plan, it can be jointly submitted to the court with the stipulation that the court order the driver's license reinstated upon release and the license will continue provided all payments are made in accordance with the payment plan submitted to the court.

If the recipient of the child support is unwilling to accept a reasonable plan that gives you the ability to drive and work, then the plan can be submitted to the court and the recipient can challenge it. Courts are likely to grant in favor of the plan, with the stipulation that you do your part too. You must make your payments. That is why you create a plan that is realistic and attainable.

This same strategy to grow into making payments as your income grows can be used to resolve most financial challenges. Taxing authorities and creditors are nearly always willing to accept a payment plan – even one that has a zero dollar per month payment for the first several months. Simply explain that those first months are necessary to regain your footing.

It's important to put together all plans for all financial challenges. They must all work together. Adjust each plan so that the total of payments is always attainable.

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