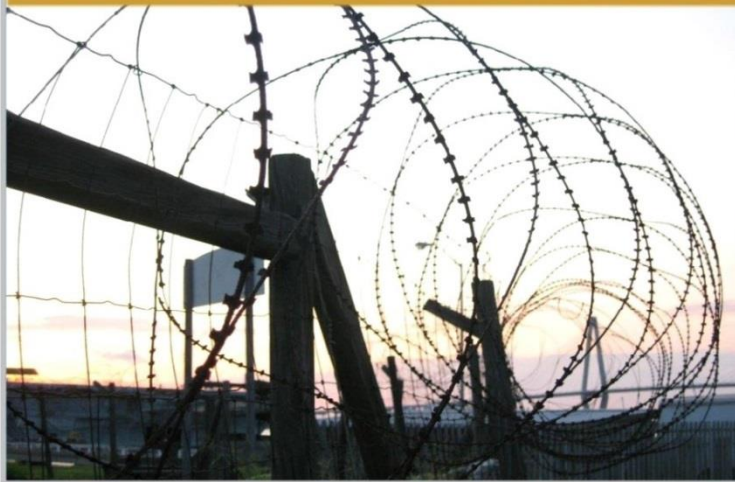


How To Stay Out Of Prison

TONY GUTBERLET



When I was released from prison I was forced to go to meetings, group counseling and the monthly with my parole officer. I was guided and told what to do by all sorts of people who had never experienced what it was like to be released from incarceration.

Prelude

I would like to dedicate this book to my mother for all the years she came to visit me, prayed for me and supported me while I was incarcerated. Thanks for believing in me Mom.

Before I got out of the state prison in Minnesota I went to the segregation unit—one of many visits I spent there! The guy that was in the cell before me had spent six months in that cell. He was an amazing Aztec artist and with pencils had drawn a panoramic, Aztec scene that seemed to never start anywhere nor stop—it was a never-ending cycle. That seems to sum up how this prison business goes for most of us...until now.

As I entertained myself with this guy's amazing artistic skill on my cell wall, I was led to the words that I had incorrectly thought originated from the Bible:

This too shall pass...

I am not sure who said it, but it challenged my thoughts to think about what I was going to do when my prison time did come to the end and I was released.

It is up to each and every one of us to make this the end of this cycle.

It did pass. Finally! When I was released from prison I was forced to go to meetings, group counseling and the monthly with my parole officer. I was guided and told what to do by all sorts of people who had never been incarcerated, could not relate what it was like to be incarcerated or what it was like to reenter society after incarceration.

Is it any surprise to anyone that one out of two inmates getting released will be back inside shortly? Are you naively coming out of prison thinking that the hard times are over? Has anyone shared with you the struggles you will face trying to re-acclimate and be one of the two that remain free?

Let me be the first.

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My name is Tony. I wasted two decades of my life in three state prisons, two private prisons and fourteen different federal prisons plus several months of riding a bus with a black box over my handcuffs. I've had enough of the jail cells. Haven't you???

From poor choices I made as a young adult I spent over twenty years of my life incarcerated. What a way to introduce myself, huh? Well, now I'm free. I wish someone would have shared with me the many struggles I would face for me to stay out of prison in a manner that I could relate, was useful and presented to me in a way I would not resent because it has been an uphill battle for me. I hope you can relate to what I am saying now because I've been where you are at. And it's been a struggle to stay free. I Know. I've been struggling for eight years now. But let me tell you—it has been worth it. I'm free. I made a choice to keep myself out of prison and, hope, by you reading this it will give you some insights that help you stay free.

Let me say this—Being free is awesome. Freedom is to be treasured every second of every day. With the national recidivism rate at over fifty percent-- that means that fifty out of one hundred will be back in prison. It is up to you

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to make a choice on which of these two groups you will be among. I made a conscious choice to stay free for the rest of my life.

Can anyone even accurately describe what a prison experience is like to someone who has never been there? I don't think so. Make sure you don't have to explain what it's like to go back. Though I don't have all of the answers for everyone, I am on my eighth year of being free. I struggled with so many things acclimating myself into society, and wondered if I were qualified to write this book to help others. The whole point of this book is to make you aware that it is a struggle to stay free but we can live a good life and never have to return to being caged up in a cell. This is my first attempt to write a book and I will do the best I can. You be the judge by staying free.

When I was in the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, KS back in the early nineties I used to shut my cell door at 9:55 pm and wonder if I would ever get out of that madness alive. It was craziness. I met some awesome characters that positively affected my life, but I don't ever want to put myself in another jail where I have to "Lock Down" and hear that door slam and lock me in or work in another UNICOR or prison factory in my life.

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This little book is not an adventure story. This book is my advice and insight for anyone coming out of prison and looking to stay out without a lot of fluff and rhetoric.

Own my behavior? I did the crime and I did the time. I'm not promising anything in this story--I make my share of mistakes--but I do hope by you reading it that it makes you stop and think so you won't ever forget that any second we can lose our freedom if we make the wrong choice. I honestly hope it helps you as much as it helps me to write it.

We are responsible for the effort and our outcome. Reread that sentence. We ARE responsible for our outcome. Our leash is shorter. More eyes are upon us. Think anyone can ever imagine the experience we lived through of what it is like to be caged? They can't. They wait for us to go back though.

Being held prisoner in a cage at gunpoint will have long term, lasting effects on us that we won't even be aware of most of the time. How do you balance the transition of coming from one world where we were forced to stay, with that prison set of rules, to this world out here with another set of rules? How do you get past the "us versus them" mentality that our legal system used to keep us under control? Be aware there is a difference in the two worlds and the lack of transition is what sends so many of us back. Don't be one of them.

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If you don't make that transition from the warped, distortion of reality in prison to the everyday world of the society you are being released to, you are likely to go back. You don't have to though. The world you left is not the world you are returning to, but, in order to stay free, you will have to make a major adjustment that the outside world got to make one day at a time. While this world moved on, without us, we were dancing to the beat of a different drum. You can make that transition and stay out. Others are doing it—I am, and so can you. It required a lot of patience for me.

I had big plans for the day I got out. Unfortunately what I had planned didn't come to fruition. It had been years since I rode in a car and never anticipated how car sick I would get. I couldn't walk because the world was spinning. It was scary—cars were coming at me so fast. It took some time to get used to being in an automobile. It had been so long, I had to learn how to drive all over again before I could get my driver's license.



CHOICE

Knowing that one out of two people released are going back to prison should give you an immediate cause for concern. Why do so many of us go back? Fifty out of a hundred! Of the fifty that went back, none of them wanted to go back. Why did they? What a shame. How did they fall in that trap? How do we stay out of it? Most have hopes, dreams, kids, and families that waited years for them yet, there they are, back in that cell writing a letter about how they've learned their lesson this time. We've seen it with thousands of people

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that came back. Some didn't make it a week! Those guys are clueless, and don't understand what happened to them or why they are back in a cage.

There are many reasons why they go back—I will share what I have learned and formed my own opinions on in the hopes that it will help you stay out. I heartily invite you to stay out of prison. You did your time. Make it your last time and be one of the fifty staying out. Why not you? What I think is the most important thing for you to learn is that it is a cognitive choice to stay out of prison. Let me say that again—it is a **CHOICE** to stay out of prison. This is something you better think about because if you make a choice to stay out of prison than there are certain actions that go with that choice. Understand this: one hundred people getting out of prison can say their choice is to stay out yet fifty of those hundred won't. What is the catch? I think most people that go back to prison don't even realize how they fell into the trap to be back behind bars. Some get lost in all that is coming at them and forget they have a choice. Why? Yes, there are many reasons why they go back to prison, the point of this book is: I don't want to be one of them. Do you? I can share my thoughts and experiences with you and hope you get something to hold on to so you can stay out of prison. Make it your **CHOICE** not to go back to prison **NOW!** Do you get it...it is a **CHOICE!?!**

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DO NOT BREAK THE LAW

Picture that one statement as a noose hanging there. Only you can put your neck in that noose. We all did before—that's how we got there. Fifty of that hundred won't get it. Will you? I hope you do. The biggest action required of you that goes with your **CHOICE** to stay out of prison is: **DON'T BREAK THE LAW!!!** Sounds easy to people that haven't been in your shoes or thinks the way you do though, does it? How do you deal with the hopelessness of trying to play catch up? When I first got out of prison I had to keep it in the forefront

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of my mind. I actually wrote a note and taped it to my mirror where I would see it every morning:

~THE WORST DAY OUT HERE IS BETTER THAN MY BEST DAY IN PRISON!~

I had to write a few of these notes and tape them on the mirror because the steam would get them messed up and they would curl up and the tape wouldn't stick. I spent enough of my life incarcerated and don't want to give away another day of my freedom. Our mind heals us by forgetting the negative, bad experiences we've been through and I wanted to remind myself constantly because I did not want to go back.

Yes, there will be bad days out here, but we have to deal with whatever life throws our way without throwing our lives away. There is no reason you need to break the law and go back to jail. The reality is there will be times where you mistakenly think you do. It is a trap—don't fall for it. Can't pay the rent? Man up and do what you have to do. Millions of Americans can't pay their rent but don't go out and commit a crime. No food? I've gone to the food shelves. I didn't get what I wanted but I got food. Humiliating to go get food, but not as bad as calling and saying I'm back in the slammer.

Think about it--fifty of those hundred going back are going to get a lot of meals they don't like either. What is really sad is the fifty that are going back weren't

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prepared mentally to understand that something was going to come along that they don't even realize, and, before they know what hit them, they broke the law and are once again back in the can for another go round. Make it a choice every day NOT to break the law and keep your neck out of that noose. Make it a choice to stay out of prison.

Law enforcement provides jobs and pay people to watch and monitor people getting out of prison so they can send them back when they break the law. It only works if you break the law though. Be aware that if you let your guard down and break the law because you think no one is watching, just remember that you put your neck in the noose. It really is that simple—don't break the law.

Every year people lose their homes and belongings to storms, tornadoes and floods. They lose their life's savings with a bad investment and they all have to start over. They suck it up and tighten their belts. That is what we have to do—start over. Build your new life on a firm foundation of positive people that function in the world doing legal things. The rewards are endless. Especially when you are able to see, touch and speak to your family and loved ones every day of the rest of your life and never have to tell your kids you can't go home with them.

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ANGER

Anger makes a lot of people react rather than think. Believe me--you will get ANGRY!!! Acknowledge it and be prepared for it. I was angry when I came out of prison. I was angry that I went to prison. I was angry over all the years I lost. Even though it was my fault I went to prison—I broke the law!—I WAS ANGRY!!! You know why? Because it hurt. IT HURT!!! Even to this day it hurts and I get angry. Acknowledge your anger and plan so it doesn't derail your choice and put you back in prison.

When I came out I had to go to group counseling sessions. I hated to have to go. One of the guys speaking said he was angry about how his arrest came about. The counselor jumped in and said he didn't want to hear that because the guy supposedly wasn't accepting responsibility for his actions. I told the group I wanted to hear about the guy's anger because he WAS! Everyone in the group wanted to hear about the guy's anger. Everyone in the group shared that they were responsible for their crime but they were still angry about getting arrested and going to prison. Don't ever let anyone tell you how you can feel. Feel! Acknowledge it and know it is real, but don't let your feelings rule or consume you. Anger is the byproduct of fear or hurt. Recognize the hurt or fear and deal with it as an adult.

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Do not let your anger put you in a position to go back to jail. It took me a while to learn this. When I couldn't get a job I got angry. When I didn't have money I got angry. When I get the humble pie shoved down my throat I get angry. When I think of the way I was treated in the courts, in jail and in prison I get angry. Many things make me angry. When life is not fair I get angry. But I cannot let my anger take control where I break the law and put that noose around my neck. If I made a CHOICE to stay out of jail then I made a choice NOT to break the law—no matter how angry I get. Does that make sense?

Things happen in life and we hold onto them and it sits below the surface ready to erupt like a volcano. Six years into a nine year sentence my case manager called me to his office and told me he had some "Great News!" for me. He told me the prisons were overcrowded and I was being released early. It was a dream come true--like winning the lottery. They called me to the laundry and dressed me out and gave me my issue of blue duds. I packed everything that had sentimental value on the cart, my laundry issue and gave away everything else I had. I was going free—I didn't need anything. I gave away the bare light bulb that hung down in the middle of my cell's ceiling. The last thing I gave away was the roll of toilet paper. I pushed that cart out to the front gate as I said goodbye to people I had known in prison for years—I felt guilty leaving them but...leaving them I was! It was my turn to go.

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After the first gate the guard inside told me to hold up, they had to process some paperwork. Hurry up and wait—what’s new? After an hour and a half of keeping me inside the first gate with dozens of guards and staff coming in and leaving, he looked at me and told me, “I’m sorry, I can’t do this to you any longer. They are playing a sick joke on you. You are not getting out Tony.” To this day this event crushes me. Makes me want to punch the cement wall it still hurts so badly. I had to push that cart back into the cell block—the joke was on me. You all have seen many variations of this story and had many of your own bad experiences in there. Several years later I was finally released, ANGRY.

The point of that story is if we allow what happened in prison or earlier in our lives to consume us and fill us with hate and anger then we will be one of the fifty going back. If I don’t break the law I don’t go back to jail. Let it go. If you don’t break the law then you don’t go back to jail. Don’t break the law—ever! There will be a lot of things that make you angry. Fifty of the one hundred can sit in jail and tell their story why their anger was more important than being the fifty out here free. They had to ride with their friends because...What?—Those friends were more important than their family, loved ones and friends? They let their anger from their hurt okay them to break the law. I don’t ever want to be in a position to go back through that intake cell and hear that guard

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say, “Loser. I told you you’d be back.” I don’t want to be the fifty of that hundred that gives him a job, a pension and opportunity to mess with me again. Do not let your anger put you in a position to go back in prison. Prepare yourself mentally every day to deal with anger in a functional manner.

Don’t let your anger fuel the tough guy, just-got-out-of-prison image. Where do you think that is going to get you? The world is full of billions of people that don’t need to fight or be tough. Tough to them is to get up, get out of bed and go to work to support themselves and the people they love. Tough to them is to keep their neck out to the noose because people are depending on them and they can’t let them down. Be the guy that builds bridges rather than the angry, bridge destroyer. No one wants people around with the angry, tough guy mentality. They are trying to build and enjoy their life. Be a good part of it with them. Remember, it is your choice to stay out of prison. Don’t let anger sabotage your choice.

PROTECT YOUR FREEDOM

How valuable is your freedom? Making your freedom valuable to you is a strategy you have to think about and protect. If you ask me is there a drink on this planet that is worth going to prison for, I would answer NO. Would you? I went for years in prison with no alcohol or, at best, fermented garbage—I

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made it to where it is now legal for me to drink. Is there a drug ever made that was worth going back to prison? No! Is there a friend or associate whose company is filled with so much charm, charisma and wisdom that you need to accompany them on a mission that is going to put you in a position where that noose is going around your neck? I don't think so. Yet how many of those fifty are going back because of these exact scenarios? They are not easy scenarios and you will find that you have to maneuver through these with people that you care about or in their own messed up way think they are offering you help. Sometimes you have to be strong enough to say..."No Thanks!" It's tough to make the choice that you want to stay out of prison.

Protect yourself and don't put yourself in a bad position. Don't jump up on the podium and grab for the noose! If you find you are then recognize it, let the noose go, get down and walk. Hop on the bus Gus. Call a friend for the million dollar answer. When you recognize you may have put yourself in a bad spot—GO!!! You have to make the choice of what is best for you. Staying out of prison is what is best for you! You can do it!!!

Stay out of the bars if that is going to put you back in. Stay away from places where there is a good chance of trouble. Don't let your ego rule you to the point where putting that noose around your neck is the only option you see. Pass on it and let Billy-Bad-Ass find someone else to take over the cliff to prison

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with him. It doesn't have to be us. There are places to go out and enjoy yourself and there are places where you have a good chance of landing in trouble. Again, pick a winner.

Remember that your prison image is only good in prison. It's a big, wide world out here and lots of room to handle conflict responsibly as an adult without putting your freedom in jeopardy. Officially retire from prison. Make choices that keep you out and put you in a position to succeed, to have a good life of whatever's left of it and enjoy it with the people you love and want to share every day. Enjoy a laugh with a little kid you love and remember...sometimes you get ice cream!!! Let them know they are important to you. I want to be here free to watch them grow. You? No kid needs to see a tough guy, prison image.

If you have a chip on your shoulder then you would be wise to knock it off yourself and deal with the reality of your situation. No one owes you anything. Get to work. Get your own stack. Legally. You just got out of prison and you are in a tough position. Are you tough enough? We put ourselves in this jam. Ride it out without doing anything stupid and you will find your way. It will be tough though. It will test you and your anger will skyrocket at times. Handle it responsibly. You can do it. Remember your choice. You need to earn money legally, and there are going to be many days that you don't make anything.

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Most ex-offenders are going to have a hard time finding a job. Deal with it. Responsibly. You will find people you wouldn't have let fold your laundry--and they are the boss! You will find people that can't pack your lunch and they are in a position to tell you what to do. Deal with it. If they made boss, you will too. Fifty of the hundred are going to use that as an excuse—but where are they again? What is your choice?

I was lucky enough to find work on the night shift at a plastic warehouse for \$7 an hour. No kidding. \$7 bucks an hour. It was miserable. It was honest, legal money though. I needed it to pay bills. It was a struggle just to get the gas money to get to work while we waited for that first check. The foreman set the machine at an insane speed. When I couldn't keep up, he started screaming at me. I foolishly jumped over the platform, got up in his face and asked him who he was talking to? I lost that job immediately. I let my anger derail my plan and I let the people that were counting on me for that paycheck down. I struggled after that. I kept my neck out of that noose though.

After that experience I found another part-time job moving furniture for \$7 an hour. I never worked so hard in my life. My first day I was so beat up and sore I swore I wasn't going back the next day. I did though. That day and every day they let me work for three years. Some weeks in the summertime I worked 80 to 90 hours to make ends meet.

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Through it all my parole officer rode me like Secretariat! Work slows down in the wintertime in the furniture moving industry. It was tough getting enough hours and I struggled to pay the bills. I made mistakes and learned from them. Make sure you pay attention to your Parole Officer. They can send you back to prison. A big part of dealing with him is to just keep a great, upbeat attitude and don't let any of it pull you off your square. Sometimes the answer for something you will ask for is "no." Be careful what you say and how you say it. When you have your head in the lion's mouth... Parole is nothing more than doing what you have to do anyway. You can't get high and think they won't catch you. You're on a leash! Be aware that more guys go back to prison because of domestic abuse, drugs or alcohol. Think that one out for yourself. I did. I'm off parole now and answer to no one. I did it by not putting my neck in the noose.

I kept that chip off my shoulder and never forgot that no one owes me anything. After three years of working for the moving company a homeowner's wallet came up missing on a job I worked and he called in to the company. The owner of the company came and got me out of a truck I was loading and told me I was going to jail. I asked him, "Did you tell the customer that I've worked for you for three years and no one has ever had anything

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missing?” Without a seconds hesitation he had me accused, tried and convicted and was ready to send me to jail.

Even when the customer called in and told them they found their wallet in a box they had packed, the owner never told me. It hurt. I was angry. I was the first one they assumed the worst about. It didn't matter that I had put my heart and soul into that job. Even though it wasn't fair, I didn't let it send me back to prison though. I kept my mouth shut. They didn't owe me anything. I needed that job until I found another. The point here being, I will continue to suffer the consequences of poor decisions I made as a younger person. So will you. Be ready for it and handle it with class. Don't let it put you as one of the fifty getting loaded on the bus to go play Zoolander! Do not take a bad situation and make it worse. Take a bad situation and make it better.

I kept that moving job and applied for work everywhere I could think. I had three years of work history now. I continuously reminded myself...my worst day out here is better than my best day in prison. I still struggle and so will you. A positive attitude has helped me more than I could ever explain. I try to build on the strengths of my efforts and take the skills that each job brought me to the next one.

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A company that wouldn't hire me originally hired me after I had a work history. Trust me, moving furniture was like my 193rd choice! When Dish Network opened up a call center, I was passed over for employment because they took credit card info over the phone. I accepted that. After three years of taking credit cards every day for the moving company without violating that trust, I was able to go back and illuminate that to them, and use that experience for Dish to have some confidence in giving me a chance. My persistence paid off and they hired me. It worked out well.

I quit the moving company and went with satellite TV! I never forgot that this new company took a chance on me and it motivated me with some hope. I worked harder than everyone else. First, I had to learn how to use a television so I could explain it to customers! Inside, I had to deal with so many people from so many walks of life--young, old and every stage in between. We meet so many people inside the prison walls and we had to effectively communicate. My communication skills were perfect for customer service. I won several awards and prizes there. I was a loyal, devoted employee, grateful for the job. Had I not moved out of state I would have been happy to spend a career working for Dish. I hope you get lucky enough to find a work environment like that where it was fun, exciting and with people constantly putting you up. The management there was impressive. I learned a lot from

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that experience. I took those skills, built on them and moved on for a new opportunity. Build on as many positives as you can, and be someone the company that takes a chance on you and hires you can count on. It is you it will help the most.

When you make a choice to stay out of prison there are many struggles that come with that choice. That's why they call them struggles. None of them require you to put your neck in that noose though—EVER! I have put over a thousand posts on craigslist "Hard Worker \$10 per hour" and got more jobs than I could count. I swung a sledgehammer and broke up concrete, carried bricks, did demo work till I couldn't breathe and plenty of garbage jobs no one else wanted. They were tough jobs and got me through tough times.

One lady hired me to break up a small basketball court in their back yard and carry all the cement over to a pile. It was five inches thick with wire mesh in it. On my way home my hands were cramping so bad I had to pull my car over on the side of the freeway. It was honest, legal work though and got me through till something else came along. Some days it was bone-weary labor and it socked it to me. Many nights I would go home beat up and exhausted. I would go in to the bathroom for a hot shower. I would look at my little sign..."My worst day out here is better than the best day in prison," smile, look at myself and think--how awesome it is to be free!!! Breathe in deep and

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breathe that FREE air. I got a lot of mileage from that little sign. Again I was grateful for what I had and didn't focus on how hard the job was that day. Now it was time to enjoy my freedom.

A note here—on all of my craigslist jobs, not once did anyone ever ask me if I had a felony on my record.

Most people won't judge you by what you did, but what you are doing now. When you are working an honest job, people will take notice. Keep your spirits up with a great attitude. When you keep smiling and asking people for work rather than whine about the tough jobs you are getting you will find people that will step up to help you. People will be pulling for you and out of the blue they will do something wonderful and it floors you and fills you with emotion and is very rewarding. Constantly surround yourself with people that will put you up and not put you down. Return the favor. Keep doing positive things, and have fun doing it. Protect YOUR freedom!

I did a house clean out, demo and paint job where I worked for three days on and the guy didn't pay me. I was angry. I wanted to destroy the house and do more damage. I didn't. Instead I took another job for a guy building an auto repair garage. It was in December in the brutal cold in Minnesota. This guy put me to work for fourteen hour days. It was just before Christmas. One day

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he tells me to get in the truck to go get supplies. He drove to Best Buy and went in. When he came out he gave me a gift card for \$300. Then he drove to Red Lobster and bought a \$100 gift card and gave it to me. He told me I was the hardest worker on the job and he appreciated my efforts and my attitude. Had I let the first guy derail me, I never would have had that Christmas with my family and loved ones. Make it a choice to stay out of prison and be with your loved ones for holidays, birthdays and every day!

The most precious gift you can ever give your family is to be there. Wanting to give a gift to someone is not a reason to break the law. Believe me, sometimes a smile on your face and being there for them is all you need. It is so much nicer than getting that call..."I got busted and I'm back in jail." Think about tomorrow before you put the noose around your neck.

Support

Just because the worst day out here is better than the best day inside doesn't mean there won't be times when life kicks your butt. Believe this, Sir Knight...some days the dragon wins! There will be days when you go **home and the armor is dented and scorched--your lance and heart** broken. This is where you will need a good support system around you.

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One particular time when I was beaten down and things seemed so hopeless I contemplated doing something stupid. Fortunately for me, my girlfriend caught what I was thinking and talking about, came up and put her hand on my heart and told me, “Hey! Don’t even talk like that. I would rather be poor and with you than have a lot of money and you back in jail.” What a difference that made when things got tight. Who knows where I would be had she said, “Well...don’t get caught but don’t get me involved.”

There are millions of Americans that struggle and don’t put their neck in the noose. They endure the humiliation and hardship and live to fight another day. They swallow their pride and vow not to ever put themselves in that position again, God willing. If you get anything from this book, hear this: “Don’t ever feel like you have to do something stupid and risk your freedom.”

A closed mouth doesn’t get fed so the saying goes, and the same holds true for support when you need it. We instinctively know where or who to turn to get what we want. We know who will allow us to take a chance and put that noose around our neck. You will have friends that offer you things or situations that will put that noose on so tight you’ll never get it off. Fifty out of a hundred accept those offers and take those chances and lose their freedom eventually. Suck it up and do what you have to do to stay out.

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We also know who to turn to that will point out the folly of stupid thoughts, will listen to us vent and guide us to better choices. It's a struggle trying to figure this all out and there is nothing wrong with finding positive support when we get drowned with hopelessness, hard times and grief. Most of us were a mess with pain, guilt and shame before we got sent to prison. Then—come on!—after all that madness inside we get released even more messed up than anyone knows. The fifty going back never built a solid support system for themselves. The only ones they had to turn to were the ones that said, "Sure. You can do it. Bring some back to me." And then talked about how stupid you are when you are back in the joint! Build positive support.

A lot of inmates suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. There are ministers and clergy that devote their lives to herding the lost, wise counselors and psychologist available that have educated themselves as to the best way to guide and enlighten and there are old friends that will listen and give their love, friendship and advice when you need it the most. When you are angry, weary and beaten down and you are stoked like a torch...do not seek out the person with the gas can, rather, find the person with the five gallon bucket of water. Put the fire out. We have burned out of control long enough. Positive support doesn't just appear. Cultivate it, plan ahead for it and nurture it with trust because you will surely need it. I have found that counseling was most

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beneficial, insightful and helpful when I sought it rather than when it was forced down my throat.

Attitude Is Everything

There were many times in the twenty years I was incarcerated that it kicked my butt mentally and I was beat down. During these bouts of hopelessness where I couldn't see the end of my sentence I would crawl into my bunk and force myself to take the time to be thankful for what I had, and not focus on what I didn't have. I had to find the things to thank God for, that I was grateful for, and voice them in my head. I had fingers, hands, arms, toes, feet, legs. I could smell! I had eyes, I could see. Even though I was in a cage I had a roof over my head. There was food in my stomach. I was warm. Thank you God! I survived many bouts of hopelessness and depression simply by being grateful for what I had, and by doing so, I wasn't consumed with what I didn't have.

A major obstacle that I've had to deal with is resenting the haves when I have not. It is jealousy at its finest. They have nice cars, a home, motorcycles, savings, etc. I don't. Fifty going back will deal with this resentment by allowing them to think that it's okay to steal. The other fifty are going to use this as motivation to work harder and smarter and build on whatever life you have left. Keep your anger and resentment in check by recognizing it and telling

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yourself, “Nobody owes me anything,” and keep your neck out of the noose. Ride the storm out and stay out of prison.

Getting out of prison is going to bring several bouts of hopelessness and feelings of insecurity. Fifty of the hundred are going to embrace what they have—their freedom! YAY!!! Start your day with a smile and keep feeding it with what you have. Do not lose sight of the many wonders in your life. Your attitude is a major force in staying out of prison. When you are smiling and greeting each day with a positive attitude your chances of positive experiences are multiplied. Find a steady source of ways to keep your attitude positive.

There will be times when you get beat down mentally. To combat that, because I know it is going to happen, I prepare myself mentally with motivational books and videos available on the internet. Often, I start my day with Og Mandino’s, *The Second Scroll*, *I Will Greet This Day With Love In My Heart*, from his book, *The Greatest Salesman In The World*. This video is available and free to watch on YouTube. There are several motivational speakers on YouTube. The No Arms, No Legs, No Worries. A Nick Vujicic video will motivate you too. Ask people around you to motivate you and “Put you up, not down!” Make sure you abide by that yourself too!!! It is easy to kick ourselves. Stop it. We’ve been kicked enough.

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Surround yourself with positive people. When people are trying to build a life and provide for themselves and their loved ones they are generally involved in positive things, events and activities. Those are the people you want to cultivate into your world. Work hard but take time to enjoy, have fun and laugh. It is your responsibility to lift your attitude every single day. Find what works for you and make sure you understand that your attitude will be a major part of keeping you in the fifty that stay out.

Computers

It is 2014 and you had better prepare yourself for the world the way it is. If you have to be dragged in to the computerized technological highway kicking and screaming...do it! I was fortunate enough to meet my girlfriend. She made me sit down at her computer and turn it on, turn it off, turn it on, turn it off. She made me plug the cords in, take them off. Plug them in, take them off. After a few times—you get it. They are all pretty much standard and you learn it quick. She made me go to the start menu and showed me the endless possibilities available right there on the internet. She had me hit the keys randomly to show me there is nothing you can do that can't be fixed. Fifty of the hundred won't go there. They are afraid to learn.

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Five year old kids learn how to use a computer. You will too. Give yourself a chance. Get an email address—they are free. I remember when I first saw I had over 800 emails in my spam folder. I was thrilled! Learning how to function in the everyday world involves the computers, notebooks and cell phones. I call my computer The Great Oz! There is a search bar where I can ask The Great Oz anything I



don't know and he will find the answer. Enrich your life with music, news, educational videos and work! It is a never ending source of information. It enhances your chances of staying free.

One hundred years ago there were old, grizzled men on horses saying they would never get in one of them automobiles. Sadly, they were left behind in the dust. Two hundred years ago men prepared themselves to go out into the world with a gun or a knife. Today you need to meet the world with the skills and knowledge that come from the computer—otherwise, you too, will be left in the dust or eaten by the sharks of today's world. Not having an email address is like a big sign on your back proclaiming to the world that you are lost in the past. Every city has a library with computer courses. They are FREE!

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You have no excuse for not preparing yourself. It's like coming out of your cell to face whatever you had to in the cell block when you first went in. Face your fears with a computer and learn how to enrich your life and chances of staying free. Fifty will, fifty won't. Pick a winner.

Employment

You will need a source of income and it is going to be tough to find a decent job. Do you tell the prospective employer you have a felony conviction and risk not getting hired or do you lie, say no criminal history, get the job and hope they don't find out? Most anyone can do a Google search and find what pops up regarding your criminal record. Give it a try and see for yourself. See what comes up when your name is typed into that search bar. Be aware of what people are going to see what the internet has on you. By looking yourself you can be prepared. I filled out dozens of applications and never got a call back for an interview. I did many interviews and tried to explain that my past record was in the past—that I now wanted to be in the fifty staying out. Sadly, to no avail. Now I just leave it blank and don't answer any part of it. Sometimes they miss it, sometimes they won't. When they do catch it they question me when I fill out a work application. I've never gotten the job when I told them.

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You have to use your judgment on which route to take. Sometimes if you get your foot in the door without telling them, you can make a home and make yourself a valuable, trusted employee. Then, once they get to know you, let your employer know about your past and hope they won't hold it against you. It is better off coming from you though. In this electronic age they will eventually find out. Some companies are receptive to helping. They are usually listed with a government resource sector. Find them and ask for help. Any job is better than no job. It is honest, legal money and you don't go to jail by working an honest job.

Be very careful when putting things on the internet that will lead people to discover events of your past that you don't need illuminated. I made a comment on a college professor's blog on the internet and used my name. Every time someone did a google search on my name this came up labeling me as an ex-felon. Fortunately I was able to reach the professor via email and explain my dilemma and he erased my name. I never made that mistake again. There are jobs out there. Be persistent and you will find one.

I found that jobs that paid me based on my results on commission were the easiest ways for me to find employment. Door to Door sales, Construction sales, Auto sales, etc., are jobs that prospective employers don't care as much about the past and are more apt to hire a person with a felony past. Wear a

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variety of hats. I sell windows, roofing, construction material, cars, watches, sunglasses and found a legal business online selling printing from my own site: www.tonysueprinting.com. I signed up from an internet site: www.estoreprinting.com. You can too.

Ask the people you know to help you get a job. If you are constantly asking for a job, someone will help you find one. Keep a positive attitude and respectfully ask. Don't complain about not finding a job. Volunteer at a church or other organization where people can get to know you. Show them a positive attitude and someone will take a chance on you.

Training

There is an abundance of job training and continuing education that is available to ex-offenders. Sign up for it and get training whenever you can. There are organizations set up to help ex-offenders. A closed mouth does not get fed. Ask for help!!! Search in your area for organizations like www.ex-offendersresourcenetwork.org. Many ex-offenders have struggled, built a life and are doing what they can to help people stay free. Fifty won't accept the help from the resources that are offering to help. Fifty will. Do you get it?

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Education, training and continuing education are available in grants to you as an ex-offender. People spend hard earned money for themselves or their kids for education and training. Treasure this opportunity. It helps you. You need that grant more than anyone else and society would rather pay for that grant than pay to send you back.

Finding a worthwhile job is important to your staying out. Work yourself up to better jobs and know that you will. Find a sucky job and you won't care what happens. If you do get a bad job, know that a better job will come along. There are job resource centers popping up in bigger cities. Use what they are offering to your advantage

Family

Most of us that were incarcerated don't realize how much our incarceration affected our families and friends. Our Moms, Dads, Brothers, Sisters, Uncles, Aunts, Cousins, Nieces, Nephews and all the people that love us are affected when we went to prison. It hurt them. We left them when we went to prison. Please don't do it to them again. Fifty of one hundred will crush their family and loved ones and break their hearts by putting their neck in that noose and getting hauled away in hand cuffs. Quit hurting people that love you and supported you while you were down. Don't do it. Make your choice!

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Ask your family and friends how your incarceration affected them. ASK THEM!!! It hurt them. Yes, you did the time, but they had to live their life without you. Ask them what it was like to explain to people that you were in prison. Where were you when they had good times to share, needed a shoulder or a helping hand? Were you one of the lucky ones who had family and friends support you while you were incarcerated? Please don't go back. Ask them how it would affect them if you went back. They will be angry because it will hurt them. There is no reason good enough for you to ever put your neck in that noose and be in a position where you go back and crush your families' hearts. Think about it. Before you ever think, "maybe I can take a chance"...think about what it would do to them if you got caught.

When I was serving time in Minnesota, my brother was killed in a head on collision coming back from Virginia after serving his stint in the United States Navy. They gave me a choice for an hour at the wake service or the funeral. I had two guards escort me to the funeral wearing handcuffs, chains and shackles. I never stopped to realize how it affected my family to have me there so with two uninvited guests watching my every move. I was too absorbed in my own self-pity to even consider that my being in prison affected them as well. I didn't realize it then, but it was never "just me" doing time—it affected

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all of my family as well. I never want to put them through that again. Don't do it to your family either. Stay out this time.

Nothing is worth that chance to risk losing your family, your freedom and putting them through it EVER! Treasure every day you have with your loved ones and friends, share your freedom with them and live each day the best you can.

Gangs

I've met a lot of different people in different street gangs over the years. Some were really good people, some not so good. I met them ALL in prison. Think twice before deciding which gang to join. I have joined several gangs since I got out of prison. I joined the "Get Out Of Bed And Go To Work Gang." I get my pay check every two weeks, keep my neck out of the noose and I enjoy each day with the people I love and want to share my life. There are millions of Americans in this gang. You are welcome to join. It is instrumental in staying out of prison.

I also joined the "Go To School Gang" and got an education to help me get better paying jobs and make me a more rounded, interesting person. You are welcome to join this one too. Do it while it is free--Get a grant now. Millions of Americans have to pay hard earned cash for education or training that is

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available to you for free. When you work and go to school doors will open for you. People will see your hard work and take a chance on you.

I want to stay out of prison so the gangs I choose are ones that are going to enhance my life, keep my neck out of the noose and allow me to spend my life free, with the people I love and care about. Choose your gang carefully because you will be judged by the company you keep. I am retired from anything illegal. If your choice is to stay out of prison then retire from your past criminal life and anything illegal. It's really that simple. There are fishing gangs, bowling gangs, softball gangs—all of them with no more expectation than to act right, have fun and play. Some gangs will guarantee you go back to prison. Some gangs will help you stay out. That is something you have to work out. Just remember, the noose is out there—don't put your neck into it.

Conclusion

I hope something here caught your attention that will make you understand that staying out of prison is a choice with actions that are your responsibility. If you had to walk across a battle field with land mines everywhere, you would look carefully with each and every step you take. Picture your life now as a battlefield that you have to walk carefully with each and every step to ensure

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you keep your neck out of the noose. It doesn't just happen—you have to make it happen.

You have spent enough time in a jail cell. Make it your choice to live and share the rest of your life with the people you love, to stay free and be able to live your life to your potential. Aspire to find a life more than being a thief, a seller of poison or someone that hurts people. Forgive yourself and take the lessons you have learned and use them to make yourself and the world you live in a better place before you leave it—as we all eventually will. Your life has a fork in the road...take it! Fifty will...fifty won't. It really is a choice. Make yours.

Good luck.

Tony G.

Resources:

Prison Mission Association (PMA) – provide Bible Correspondence courses in English and Spanish at no cost. If you complete all the lessons you can get 6 college level credits from Berean Bible Institute, Slinger, Wisconsin. www.bereanbibleinstitute.org.

For more information contact Dwight Anderson 612-423-3457 or write PMA, PO Box 2300, Port Orchard, WA 98366 and request your first lesson. Or you can download them at www.prisonmission.org.