

Excerpt: Why?

Mason: “Harrison? Why? Why take on the cause of the mentally and the criminal justice system? You could have easily settled back and lived your life and concentrated solely on your own mental health and your family. So, why take on a cause that was so unbelievably misunderstood and stigmatized?”

Harrison: Hmmm – a big question. A, like they say, loaded question. Mason, my young friend, there are certain things you need to understand about people. First and foremost – everyone is simply trying to be happy. I don’t care if you are dirt poor or super rich – you are constantly seeking happiness. People go about doing this in many ways. Some go through life singularly. A belief system that suggests the world and their life is about them. They are not necessarily bad people Mason, they simply are seeking happiness and believe they can attain it in that fashion. Then, my friend, there are the people that believe that there is something much bigger than they, an entity that suggests that their lives are not about them, but about a bigger more complex plan. Personally, I subscribe to the latter. I understand the other point of view. Remember, always Mason – it is your responsibility, to not only know your point of view, but others point of view and know the other side so well that you could actually defend it in any debate. Anything less is pure ignorance and you should never engage in a conversation that you are not prepared to defend! Back to your question...

Mason – You need to understand that while we have touched the surface of my experiences, and the horror that they were, we have yet to tap the most important aspects of my life. The most important aspects of my life are the lives of others.

I was a victim for a long time and am still, to some extent a victim. Some days are better than others – but I hear the voices and I feel the pain of the past, those are the not so good days and I give myself those. 40 years later and I still experience those events in my mind. What we have not discussed is the fact that beyond being a victim, even during the events, I rose above and found

safety and peace in helping others. I couldn't give up on them. If I could help just a few understand a different standard of acceptability, a different level of moral grounding, it was possible that I could change even those that assaulted me.

I remember thinking after the first month in prison and counseling and talking with inmates from walks of life that simply could not fathom, "my God, they simply do not know!" They did not know my world existed and they did not comprehend that it could be possible for them – can you imagine Mason? Can you imagine everything that you believe in and know to NOT be true? For them it was. They, in the United States of America – Believed that it was impossible for them to ever leave poverty.

Then came the mentally ill. Mason, it is nearly impossible for me to describe to you a man – a man so medicated that he cannot communicate – a man so alone, so destitute, so beaten down that when you look into his eyes – there is nothing there. Now multiply him – that one man, by 16,000 and you will have the number of people in the Ohio Department Rehabilitation and Corrections with this problem. Maybe not right now – but if they keep going the way they are – they will be and the numbers will grow by 150% within 10 years at the current rate of growth.

Then there was the prosecutor and judge that prosecuted me. I had no desire to have them removed from their posts – what I had a desire to do was go far beyond them and make sure that they never had the choice to do what they did. As far as I was concerned with those two and my local judicial/criminal justice system – I actually laughed. What else was there to do? To comprehend such a simplistic mind and ignorant prejudice was just something I was not going to waste my time with – my time was better spent with those that made decisions that actually make a difference in this world – my judge and prosecutor made a difference in MY world, but they had very little impact on any others.

Now the reason I tell you this Mason, is this: In my belief system, the world is not about me. My journey was not predestined and I have had free will to choose my path. However, during my journey I also had the free will to absorb every single bit of it and that I did. The bad and the good were absorbed completely, I was saturated in life. The answer to your question comes in a pretty simple statement I made to myself. “These people, the incarcerated mentally ill, do not have a voice! I am unique within my own situation. Not many can speak for themselves, not many can define their illness and not many can communicate their needs to a system that is not willing to give those needs.”

What purpose did it serve to incarcerated people and worsen them? Simply to punish? You can't punish mental illness out of someone! I have no problem with incarcerating someone with a mental illness that has done wrong – but you darn well better be making sure you get their illness stabilized – anything less is nothing less than malpractice as far as I am concerned.

So that is what I set out to do Mason. My goal was to see the standard of care for the mentally ill incarcerated be equal to the standard of care for the rest of society. My goal was to squeeze and tighten the laws and restrict them to NOT allow a judge or prosecutor that have NO inkling of what mental health is – to have the ability to judge someone for it. My goal was to provide awareness and erase stigma. My goal was to simply say to society and the systems therein that this is not acceptable – what I lived through – the solution that was sentenced to me – was NOT acceptable and will no longer be tolerated.

I had a voice Mason – I spent years absorbing all that I needed to know about a situation I never knew existed and I was ready to use the voice I had – and boy did I know how to use it! I was tired of being angry, I was tired of thinking about the “what if's”. What was done was done and I could either let it all haunt me – OR – I could let it haunt those that found it acceptable to treat another human being in this matter. I am not a masochists – so I chose the latter.

You see Mason – in my belief system, it would have been complete hypocrisy and blatant ignorance for me to simply live and see what I saw and then not do something about it. This purpose might not have been chosen for me – but the circumstances in my life cultivated a purpose that I simply could not ignore. When you’ve lived through what I lived through and SO many others have lived through – fear is not really an issue and without fear – determination takes on a whole new meaning!”