

The No Longer & the Not Yet

Many years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a lecture by Joseph W. Matthews, Dean of the Ecumenical Institute. In the lecture he stressed the fact that we live between our past and our future. As he put it, we live between, “*the no longer and the not yet.*” He said our present reality is only a split second between our past and our future, and that if we are to become intentional, life-giving people, then we must come to terms with these two realities, and that most people live toward one or the other.

There are people in prison who dream of getting back to the street and the life they left behind. Others say to themselves, “never again,” and begin to shape a future hope focused in a new direction. However, there can be dangers. For instance, if a person’s future hope is focused entirely on “making the board, the he/she needs to hear Chris Wilson’s primary question to people who decide to make a move. He asks: “What is your end game?” If the prison door is your end game, then you have a problem. Once you pass through that door the prison years become part of the *no longer*, and on the other side of the door you face the *not yet*.

Larry White points out in his writing that a false end game can place you in a difficult situation. He believed he would never be released from prison. He writes:

After all, coming home had been unexpected. I’d prepared myself to die in prison. I’d made peace with it. I was denied release by the parole board four times; when I would appear at my scheduled hearings, the commissioners who held my fate wasted little time projecting an attitude that said, “Don’t even sit down, you don’t need to bother.”

But once I returned to New York City, where I found myself going most often was to a park bench. I would sit there gazing at the Hudson River and wondering how I would ever make it in society.

As I whiled away hours on that park bench, I wonder if I’d made a mistake. I actually wanted to go back to prison.

...At some point, I took a deep breath and tried to figure out reintegration for myself. I tentatively dipped my toe into the life of the city.

...My circle of contacts and friends grew even wider. I created a supportive social network. I became part of a community.

Chris Wilson applies this to his own life:

Now, what was my endgame? I was working, but what was I working toward? Getting out. That was obvious. But why? What did I want to get out for? I decided to stay in my cell until I figured it out. I thought it would take a few hours. How hard could it be, right? I ended up staying down three days.

Coming to terms with “the no longer and the not yet” is serious business. Our future depends on it.