

Born Again, Transition, and Change

There is an old saying that people who come to prison have three choices, *the womb, the tomb, or the cocoon*. They can be born again, die, or go through a slow transition and become a new man or woman. I have seen all three take place and at times in the same person.

Carl Jung, in his *Stages of Life*, divides life into two phases. The first is the morning phase which prepares us to deal with the outer world. In this first phase we develop physically, learn to read and write, and set goals for when we become adults. The afternoon phase is when we come to terms with our inner world. Many cultures mark this transition with a rite of passage where the boy becomes a man and the girl a woman. For Jung the transition between the two often takes the form of a midlife crisis and is like a difficult birth. Jung firmly believed that most people enter the second half of life wholly unprepared.

For many, coming to prison can be a strange rite of passage between these two phases of life. For some, coming to prison can be a death experience where they find themselves forgotten and powerless. For others, it may take the form of a difficult birth in which they find themselves like Dante in the *Inferno*: “*In a dark wood where the straight way is lost.*” Here they are faced with the three choices, *the womb, the tomb, and the cocoon*.

Being born again can take many forms. For some it may be a deeply religious experience that begins with an encounter with God. For Moses, who was on the run, it took place on a mountain where he was confronted with the divine presence. There he stopped being a fugitive and became the liberator of his people. For Ezekiel, transformation took place when he was confronted with the valley of dry bones, and the death of his people. Jesus entered the wilderness, was confronted by Satan and the powers of darkness, and came out committed to a ministry of redemptive love.

In prison it may take place when a person gets in touch with their potential. I have seen many men in prison who were school dropouts in the street, find their potential and leave prison with

advanced college degrees and become social workers, lawyers, teachers, business owners, and clergy. It may also start with a defining moment in which a person suddenly understands that if he/she doesn't change, they will end up in prison for the rest of their life.

Being born again and the cocoon experience may go together. Larry White urges men serving a long sentence to set a firm goal to leave prison a better person than when they came. They must set goals that are powerful and life-giving, that will set them on a long journey that will guarantee profound change. Franz Fanon said: "*We must create a new man.*"