From Reentry to Reintegration[1]
by Larry White (part 1)

After thirty-two years behind prison walls, I headed for a life on the outside. I had forty state-issued dollars and the scrapbooks I'd filled over the years with pictures of places I dreamed of going, people I dreamed of meeting, and things I dreamed of doing.

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. I was seventy-three years old and alone. Both my wife and mother had died while I was in prison. My son lived in North Carolina; parole regulations barred me from visiting him. Another relative lived in New York, but visiting her would also have been a parole violation— I wasn't allowed near guns, and she was a police officer and kept guns in her home.

Like most long-timers, I didn't know anyone in the "legitimate society" that I was now expected to embrace and thrive in. All I knew was “the hood” and prison, which was an extension of “the ‘hood." How would I ever be able to connect with any of the mainstream people whom I'd been calling "squares" all my life? How was I now to become one of them?

In those early months after coming home, I had only two dependable companions. One was loneliness. It sets in quietly in prison, and you accept it. But on the streets, it's palpable. The other companion was fear. I was scared to death of life on the outside

After all, coming home had been unexpected. I'd prepared myself to die in prison. Id made my peace with it. I was denied release by the parole board four times; when I would appear

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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." I concluded that despite whatever I had accomplished in prison, I would keep getting denied because of the nature of my crime. I had been sentenced to twenty-five years to life for a murder and robbery. And not long after my arrest, while I was still in jail at Rikers Island, I had attempted to escape. I was captured in the East River. I was lucky; others who escaped with me drowned.

As I settled into years behind bars, I created a life that had meaning. I became a scholar. I started classes and programs, including those for men sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. I encouraged other incarcerated men to study their situation in the context of racism and this nation's history; it is no accident that the overwhelming majority of people in New York prisons are black and Latino and come from only a handful of poor neighborhoods in New York City. I organized the men to work to change prison conditions from inside and to stand up against disrespectful treatment at the hands of guards and corrections administrators. I organized them to own their power. Over time, this push for socially conscious empowerment became a movement chat spread from one correctional facility to another in the state.

I reached a point in life where the only hard part about growing old in prison was my concern that I would someday be unable to protect myself against men with a predatory nature. But, one day, a corrections officer urged me to try for parole one more time. He figured I might have a better shot at it now that the new governor, Eliot Spitzer, was ushering in what seemed to be a fairer approach to criminal justice than that of his predecessor, George Pataki. So, I gave it a try. And I was granted release.

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

It's not that I didn't have the basics that are critically needed upon release. I did. The Fortune Society, a nonprofit organization that promotes successful prisoner reentry, had thrown me a lifeline with housing, employment, medical care. For that, I was and remain deeply grateful.

But reentry is only part of the journey. Hundreds of thousands of people in this nation leave prison and reenter society every year, and far too many are doomed to be trapped in recidivism's revolving door. Why? Because they don't reintegrate into society. While they're warned against associating with the same old people in the same old neighborhoods that led them to prison, they are not equipped with the tools to make new, supportive connections; they don't know how to build new social networks and embrace a legitimate lifestyle. And they don't know where to turn in order to learn.

I counted myself among them. Yet, I knew I needed to reintegrate. And I wanted to—deeply. I wanted to become an active member of a community and raise my voice on issues that affected it. I wanted to participate in a range of social and cultural activities. I wanted to become a valued member of advocacy groups whose concerns reflected my own. I wanted to belong