

## I Recognized I Was In Crisis

by Randolph Outlaw

I was numbed by the terms of my sentence, and the first few years of my incarceration went by in a haze. I had little self-understanding and I did not have the capacity to deal with my long-term confinement. In reaction, I let myself go. I stopped caring how I looked and dressed. I had no value for life, and people responded to my attitude by finding little to value in me. After three years of this type of self-abuse, I had physically and mentally deteriorated and had no concern for myself or my family, who suffered as they saw me wasting away. Furthermore, my attitude got me into a lot of trouble with the prison administration, because of my inability to obey rules and adjust to the environment.

Eventually, I recognized that I was in a crisis. I was listless, with no purpose. I had no identity beyond the youths I emulated in the prison. I was convinced that I would die without a major change in my life. I needed an identity and a way to escape my role as a victim. I sought answers to my problems out of a need to survive. Alone in my cell, I started reading a poetry book another inmate had given me. Then I began writing poetry by imitating the style of the poets. My writing put me in touch with my inner self. Through reflection, I discovered that I was searching for a truth and reality I knew was missing in my life.

During this period, I began undergoing a conversion which would extend over years and have many dimensions. I rejected my belief that my peers could support me. Eventually, I broke my old habit of dependence on this group. As a result, they no longer defined me. I learned it was up to me to decide what I was to make of myself. My mother

had been urging me to go to college since I earned my high school diploma on Rikers Island before I was sentenced and went through my period of depression. Now I followed her instructions. Over the years, education broadened my perspective and challenged many of my prejudices. The study and discipline was a major contributing factor in my maturation as an individual. Studying psychology and sociology, I was able to grasp how my experiences led me and other youths to a life of crime. Furthermore, I realized that we were not entirely to blame for committing crimes. Our experiences had etched in our consciousness impressions of negative self-images-- self "blame." These impressions shaped our lives so that we could never be anything more than criminals. Once I understood this process, I felt a sense of responsibility that compelled me to share what I knew with my peers. I began working as a peer counselor in a prison program geared to help men about to be released on parole. I worked in the program for four years before being accepted as a candidate for the first prison master's degree program in the country offered by New York Theological Seminary... Seminary gave me the words to name my personal struggle.