

If Opportunity Isn't Knocking, Build a Door:
Intentionality and the New Man¹

By Gordon W. Brown

My first visit to a New York prison was in November 1997. I attended an Exodus meeting and experienced its Opening Rite, thoughtful discussions, planning sessions, and life-giving projects. I witnessed extraordinary men building goals, making commitments, and preparing for a better future.

Larry "Lukman" White was one of the founding inmate members of Exodus. He mentored many men and he was the creator of Hope Lives for Lifers. For decades Larry taught four ground rules:

1. Do everything you can to obtain your liberty.
2. Leave prison a better person than when you entered.
3. Leave prison better than you found it.
4. Prepare yourself so that you never return to prison.

These principles are life-giving and apply to every incarcerated person, regardless of sentence length, even those serving Life Without Parole.

What lies beneath these rules? What supports and guides the person who embraces them? The answer is simple: choice.

The intentional human being makes choices and develops plans. He is not waiting for the wind to change and blow him out of the door. He isn't waiting on the legislature, or his lawyer, or the ACLU to swing that gate open for him. He honestly assesses his situation, recognizes the sources of his limitations, and acknowledges his own role in creating them. With that

¹ From a speech for a Lifers Association Event at Shawangunk C.F. - 6/6/15

understanding, he can begin mapping a path out of self-imposed captivity and beyond the restrictions imposed by circumstance.

The intentional human being is active, not reactive, and he understands that inaction is also a choice. Every step toward improvement is built through deliberate decisions. One choice after another, one step after another, he builds his future brick by brick. He knows that dreams and wishes alone are just vapor. He knows that realizing his desires demands organization and forethought.

A goal is a dream with an action plan.

Opportunities are rarely just handed to us. Nevertheless, we need to be ready for them. When the landscape of opportunity is a desert that does not mean that there are no living things, no vegetation, or that the life-giving water can never come. There are plants and animals in the desert that lie dormant, but when the rains come they drink, they bloom, they grow and survive because they have always been poised and ready for the rain. Readiness makes growth possible.

I am not advocating that we lie dormant. We're not just waiting to be told what to do, where to go, or how to be, in order to achieve your liberty. We won't accept that only other people have the keys to improving our lot in general. We must choose to restore our own physical health, heal our minds, improve our thinking and behavior, and learn to understand and control our emotions. We must decide what influences to embrace, what associations to cultivate, and what habits to leave behind.

This is the path toward becoming the New Man.

The New Man displays integrity, courage, calmness, thoughtfulness, and love without apology. He leaves behind cruelty, deception, recklessness, ignorance, and self-destructive

behavior. He learns what serves his growth and what undermines it. He practices freedom even when liberty is withheld.

The New Man nurtures and mentors others. He observes carefully, evaluates obstacles and opportunities, and plans his next move wisely. He is a builder—creating stronger communities in which people can live, work, love, and reach their full potential as human beings.

Most importantly, the New Man creates opportunity where none appears to exist.

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