



Breaking the cycle of crime—jail—more crime—more jail: This is what AWE is all about.

Damon: Coming Out of Solitary

"Hi, I'm Sister Elaine," I said, bending my head to speak through the small holes of a thick metal cell door in the lock-down unit. "The deputy warden asked me to create a course for men in solitary and ad-seg. Maybe you'd want to take it."

Damon stared at me through the thick glass. He had been in solitary confinement for several years. Now he had a cell-mate, although he was still in administrative segregation. "Why would I do that?" he asked.

"The warden wants to give you a chance to transition into a communal housing unit with the general population."

He raised his eyebrows. "Me? I've never taken a program or course in the 30 years I've been locked up. I don't trust the system—or what they have to offer. But tell me about your course anyway—and did you say you're a nun? I met a nun—Sr. Ruth—about 20 years ago in another prison. She was nice to me."

I explained that my 12-week course would cover mindfulness-based stress management, anger management, meditation, and skills to identify dysfunctional thinking. It would help him think and act in ways that didn't keep him locked down. "I'm guessing," I said smiling, "that there's some stress and anger when you're locked down 23 hours everyday."

He smiled back. "Oh, just a bit," he said.

"I'd meet with you every week for about 20 minutes. You'll have assignments and meditation practice, and we'll evaluate as we go along to see if it's helping. If you have no behavior violations for several months, the warden will eventually move you to a unit where you'll have time on the yard, contact visits with family, more privileges."

Damon agreed to try the course. As the weeks went on, he said, "I was a teenager when I came to prison. I always thought there was some good in me, but I got in so much trouble nobody had a chance to notice. Trouble followed me to prison. I'm not proud of it. I don't expect to get any chances now. I'm just telling you how it is."

Although Damon equated himself with trouble, his participation in the course spoke otherwise. After three weeks his cellmate told him, "I don't even know who you are. You don't go off on me anymore. You don't yell at the guards. Who are you?"

Among the materials and practices that were helping him, Damon included his daily meditation. He said it disturbed him, but also brought him a peace he'd never known. Instead of 10 minutes twice a day, he meditated 30 minutes twice a day. "A lot came up in that space—things I hid, things I felt, things I was doing that made no sense," he said. "I'm also learning to let things go." At the end of 12 weeks, even Damon didn't recognize himself. He asked if I could come to his cell just a few minutes when I came back for the next course, so he could reinforce what he was learning. During that time he also "taught" the course to a younger inmate—through the pipes that ran between their two floors.

After six months Damon's transformation was so noticeable that the warden eventually moved him to general population—after more years in segregation than Damon said he could count. Today, he continues his practice of meditation, his teaching of other inmates, and his new way of being. He also continues to quench his thirst for reading—"positive stuff, stuff that will improve my mind, help me to grow. Most of all I want to say thanks for starting me to think about things from a very different angle. It made me realize that what I thought to be true may not actually be true at all. The program taught me to keep an open mind, learn to feel and think beyond the normal way of prison thinking."

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