

From Inside the Walls Reprinted from the July 1998

by Barry DeLeon

A wise man once said, "The highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get for it but what they become by it."

He who will not surrender cannot be defeated, no matter what the odds against him, no matter how untenable his position appears. But even giving up the struggle is not necessarily a defeat; it's a deliberate choice, a decision no enemy can force on us; we make it – or reject it – for ourselves. I believe that we should make it only when we discover that we're in the wrong struggle, or that we're in the right struggle at the wrong time. In prison, there seems to me to be one struggle. To be free. To be free, but to be so as a changed man should be the goal. In a society that believes rehabilitation to be a futile effort, one must rehabilitate oneself.

I read recently about a psychological doctrine suggesting that many people secretly desire to fail. In their failure, they find satisfaction. As sad as this may sound, some people seem to welcome defeat. The sadness lies not in the defeat but in the desire for it. Accepting defeat is not always wrong, but, it is unproductive to desire it. Thinking that such failures are secret and successful protests seems to me to be irrational thinking.

People who are in prison primarily fall into two categories. Those paying for mistakes that were made consciously and those who succumb to their addictions. A person must reflect on their failures in order to develop a clear plan for a more productive future. Then, a defeat can be revealed as a victory. Someone recently told me that had it not been for prison, he would probably be dead. It is ironic that prison, a means of holding a man captive could set him free. I could relate to his story with such clarity of thoughts as I look at the chapters of my life. I'm striving to make my prison chapter a "positive" outcome as I look towards the future. My Father once told me that there's not much education in the second kick of a mule. From him, I've learned that the worst mistake one can make is the one that teaches a man nothing. Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) has shown me that the way we live our "life-story" is what matters, not the way each chapter ends. A new chapter begins at once. As a popular song by the musical group Tonic says, "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end."

In prison, it is considered by some more sensible to sit idly and attempt nothing than to atypically attempt to change and risk failure. This approach is irrational. It is a caution more dangerous than the recklessness exhibited which brought most of us to prison in the first place. Those who fail to change will prolong their release and upon release, the fact that they'll be unprepared for society, will inevitably re-offend and end up back in prison. Another new chapter of failure.

To evaluate life's chapters, we need to understand where our lives are going – and many of us don't. We don't have a meaning and purpose in our lives. We can't "see" the end of a chapter. We can't "see" the story's happy ending. We see ourselves in the night and believe there will never be another day. But, what if another day is right around the corner? What if victory and defeat are only different ways of looking at an incident in an unending narrative? In such context, failure never comes at the end of an endeavor; it comes at the beginning. What matters, especially in my environment, is not the outcome, but the input; not the failure of where we find ourselves but the success of closing this chapter and moving on to the next. Prison is understood to be a failure but I believe that the deeper the hole, the greater the euphoria climbing out.

It has been over a year since I took part in a facilitated SMART[®] group. Rich Dowling, who began the SMART[®] program in MCCF here in New Jersey introduced me to what I believe to be the single most (comprehensive) program and way of thinking for turning failures into victories. The concepts of SMART[®], properly interpreted and sincerely applied to one's life, can turn an apparent "dead-end" into a fork in the road. Every dead-end street has one end open; the way in is often the way out.

SMART[®] turns lemons into lemonade. The principles work, the concepts can guide one's life, and the tools and techniques of REBT can truly enable us to gain independence from addictive behaviors. More than that, it can help us find meaning and purpose in our lives.

Editor's Note: Barry would welcome your letters and thoughts regarding this and previous "From Inside the Walls" columns. Letters may be addressed to: Barry DeLeon, #131953, G.S.Y.C.F., PO Box 11401, Yardville, NJ 08620.