**Victorious Living**

Life Changing Events and Self-Forgiveness

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Life Changing Events (LCE’s) happen to all of us. They are occurrences that change the trajectory of our lives. We’ve all experienced this and, quite likely, there is another one around the corner. I conduct a program inside prisons and jails, in substance abuse recovery centers and with youth groups called Values-Aligned Goal Setting©. I created the program while I was incarcerated and presented it to hundreds of my fellow inmates during the last five years of the 13 years that I was in prison.

In reflecting upon my life, I recognized the LCE’s that I had encountered. There are two types of Life Changing Events; *positive ones* like getting married, the birth of a child, a promotion at work, or buying a home. It is easy to deal with these LCE’s, we celebrate them. Life’s realities also have *negative LCE’s* in store for us. The loss of a loved one, a divorce, loss of a job, addiction to drugs or alcohol, to name a few. These negative LCE’s can be categorized into events beyond our control (the death of a loved one) and those things that happen for which we bear some or all of the responsibility.

For me, I had two profound Life Changing Events: going to prison and the death of my mother and father while I was away. There was nothing I could do about my parents dying, that would have happened whether I was incarcerated or not. It has left a hole in my heart that is only filled through my faith. The prison thing, however, was entirely of my doing. There was something about my behavior that led to incarceration; my conduct betrayed my values and my upbringing. It took me several years to get to the point where I could say this.

There are two things, as a part of the human condition, that we do when forced to look in the proverbial mirror regarding our failures. The first is to blame, “it’s somebody else’s fault this happened.” Blaming others moves us to the role of the victim and obscures our own behaviors. When blaming no longer works we move on to justifying. Common justifications include “everyone is doing it,” “no one will find out” and, “I am not hurting anybody.” We do this even though we know we are not being truthful with ourselves

I discovered the real answer to our negative Life Changing Events is personal responsibility. I now openly say I made bad choices, I succumbed to greed, and I lost my way. This was not an easy thing for me to accept. In fact, it was, and still is, difficult for me to cope with the hurt I caused others by my behavior. However, my frame of mind completely changed when I owned my stuff. Everyone makes mistakes, the quicker we embrace this, the easier it becomes to admit our failures and the quicker we can move on with our lives. Admitting our mistakes means apologizing to those who were impacted by our actions

It took me several years to get to this point where I could look at the reality of my situation. I was separated from my family, I had lost the respect of any, and I had a long sentence staring me in the face. I realized it was a choice to pick myself up off the floor. Many who are reading this understand that feeling. We realize it requires courage to muster the necessary strength. For me, the root of that courage came through my faith.

I routinely have the privilege of speaking to groups. What I hope others take from my failures and discoveries is the importance of accepting responsibility and admitting we are human beings, and that human beings make mistakes I hope others will see that we all get knocked down, that’s what LCE’s do. It is getting back up that defines us, that shows our true character, and inspires others to pick themselves up.

Reflecting on the period of time where I was blaming and justifying, not accepting responsibility, I realize the negativity I was carrying around inside me. When I finally became truthful with myself, the anger that I projected on others through blaming, turned inward. I became angry with myself for the things I had done. I felt overwhelmed by the hurt I caused for so many, especially those I cared most about. I was ashamed for how I had lived my life.

Part of the problem with this mindset is that it consumed me. It caused me to look only at the mistakes I had made and the consequences of my actions. It so overshadowed every other aspect of my life and any of the good things I had done, before or since what was a brief time, when compared to the entirety of my life.

I learned the only way to get past this feeling and the negativity it carried was through self-forgiveness. I had to accept that it was impossible for me to turn back time and change the things that I had done. I had to accept that living my life with self-hatred would never allow me to find peace or happiness. Once again, my eyes were opened to the answer my faith provided. Matthew 9:13 *I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come for have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.* To me, this is the essence of being Christian; to realize that Jesus was crucified so that the sins of all believers would be forgiven. I reflect on this passage every day. It is a wonderful realization that Jesus’ forgiveness allows me to forgive myself.

I have enjoyed so many incredible blessings since I have returned to society only 20 months ago. I have met some wonderful people and have had the opportunity to help others through the programs I conduct and by sharing my story. I still struggle with others who have not forgiven me. I still mourn the loss of my parents. I still wish I had behaved differently in 1996 when I committed my crime.

However, I know today that I am a fallible human being. I know that the mistakes I made are not who I am and what I am made of. I accept responsibility for what I did and am deeply sorry for those I hurt. I know that my faith is rooted in forgiveness and this has allowed me to strive to do more with my life. I know that I was able to get up off the mat and move forward with my head held high. I know that I will continue to make mistakes. But my lived experiences allow me to more quickly and easily accept responsibility for my shortcomings, to apologize to those I have affected, to forgive myself and, to forge ahead with a feeling of purpose.