

Acceptance

By Damon Azali-Rojas

How do you identify?

How do others perceive your identity?

These are the questions we ask in the circle process on March 13 as we begin our second weekend of Coaching for Healing and Non-Violence inside California State Prison—Los Angeles County at Lancaster (CSP-LAC). I begin the circle with my own offering.

How do you identify?

Hi I'm Damon. I identify as a Black man, as a father to two mixed race boys. One who has exceptional needs and a visual impairment as the result of a brain tumor that he suffered when he was 7-months old. I identify as an African Traditional Priest. I identify as a Leftist, as a Socialist. I identify as a prison abolitionist. As a person that believes that restorative justice doesn't do enough. I believe that we need to transform systemic oppression to have any semblance of justice. I unfairly benefit from hetero-patriarchy and as a result I am trying to be a survivor of male fragility. I am married to a strong-ass Chicana that survived the projects in Houston and made it to Stanford University.

How do others perceive your identity?

Humh, I think people perceive me as a grounded got my shit together leader. Although I am far less grounded at home and somehow create the illusion that I have my shit together. Part of my stepping up is not so much that I want to lead but I am willing to lead. I think that because I speak rather articulately about patriarchal privilege I think that folks sometimes give me a pass for unskillful behavior. At the same time although I fully welcome feedback and seek it out I am often scared as hell of criticism. Just like all of us, I have parts of me worrying about if people like me, if I belong and if they accept me for who I truly am.

We continue around the circle and here are some excerpts from what the men share:

I was raised by a single parent. I was one of two brothers. I took to the streets to learn how to be a man. That was the worst decision of my life. I accidentally shot a man in the leg and got 39 years to life. It was these men in here in this circle that pulled me up. They are the ones that accepted me and looked after me.

I was born a product of rape. At the age of 5 I had been in 48 different foster homes with my little brother. I am in here because I killed the man that sexually assaulted me and my little brother. Even though the lawyers knew what he did to us, I didn't have the ability to say so. I was afraid that they would call me names, that they would say that I was gay. So I just stayed quiet and didn't say anything. That was 19 years ago.

I was a nerd. I mean the kind of person that everybody talked under their breath about. Always afraid that no one would accept me. One day I got beat up real bad because of it. That is when I started to look for acceptance, not because of my grades or being a class clown but instead by being the most ruthless person that I could be. If I couldn't be accepted for my intelligence then I would get your respect through fear. My goal was to become Michael Myers, to instill fear even when I wasn't around. It took a long time but I realized that I just wanted someone to accept me and love me for me. Not with the masks and the illusions, but just me.

When I got in here, I was young and wild. Still trying to be accepted by somebody. Unfortunately I got sucked in with the others that were also looking for acceptance in the wrong way. That got me thrown into solitary confinement. During those 20 years that I was in my cell for 23 hours a day I had a lot of time to think. I made decisions to do it a different way. But the real test was when I got back into general population and could I hold firm to those commitments. This is what it was able to do with the help of a lot of the brothers in this room. They spent time with me. They cried with me. For the first time in my life there were people that didn't judge me. Now I do the same for the youngsters that come in here. I let them know they can lead with love instead of hate.

Of the 26 men in the program 16 are Black, 2 Latino, 1 Indigenous, 3 white, and 4 API and still everything comes down to the deep desire to connect with human beings in a pure and authentic way. These needs are crystal clear. Every single person in the circle—every single person—talks about how they ended up in prison because they wanted to feel accepted. Each time we come in for a training, we experience the gift of supporting the men's development as coaches. The process inherently lives in place of acceptance, non-judgment and seeing the essence of our clients. The essence of these men is that they love, they have dreams, and like all of us, like me, they want to be seen deeply and accepted for who they are.

I can share so much more but I will leave you with letters from two of our participants. They explain, in their words, the impact of all of us coming together.

Our third weekend will be May 12-13. We will share the next phase of this journey with you then.

RE: Appreciation for Leadership That Works

Dear Amanda,

I just want to thank you, Damon Azalia-Rojas, and, of course, Leadership That Works, for this deeply appreciated opportunity to learn the skills that Coaching for Healing and Non-violence offers. Having taken Catalyst and getting a foundational understanding of trauma and trauma-reenactment, I sense to my core that the prison population is ripe and apt for the guidance and healing that we can potentially lend to our peers. As I shared with you during our last session, the vast majority of us come from dysfunctional homes where abuse of one type or another was the norm. Many of us were injured in profound ways that we didn't understand, and our self-concept was greatly diminished. The negative culture of prison and the divisive sub-culture of "us verse them" that the guards reify, reinforces our limiting self-views. Coaching for Healing and Non-violence has the potential to reverse our prior damage, and lend new resiliency to our current situation. For instance, when I coached a peer-client regarding his limiting self-concept, I was able to guide him toward the true essence of his being: his abilities and resourcefulness. We both walked away inspired and refreshed. The most wonderful thing about this training is that we are teaching our clients to learn how to rely on their own resourcefulness, and not be dependent on us for each challenge that presents itself. That is transformative, and thus, powerful.


I coached a dear friend for a couple of sessions, who has cancer. She used to think negative and worry. Our coaching sessions have transformed her view point to one of positive possibilities and preferred outcomes. As a novice coach, these experiences tell me that I have a bright future in this field, with many, many possibilities that cannot be compared to anything I've accomplished before.


In a word, I am excited!


Thank you sincerely,


25 MARCH 2019; MON.

Gratefully Cherished "Coaching For Transformation" Brethren

 GREETINGS to my SISTERS, & soulful BROTHER—who give to teach the "Coaching For Healing and Non-Violence" class on A-Yard/CSP-LAC—& those whom WARM YOUR CARING souls; in my FRIEND JESUS'S EVER CARING LOVE'S. "Thank You-all" for CARING about the transformation of prisoners, & AS A RESULT—STRENGTHENING OUR FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES. The following is a brief synopsis of A 52-YEAR JOURNEY: FROM IGNORANCE & SORROW (childhood to incarceration—24 yrs); FROM SELFISHNESS to CARING (arrest to today—28 yrs). THESE 2-PARAGRAPHS ARE SHARED TO GIVE CONTEXT to how much "Coaching For Transformation" WAS NEEDED; THEREFORE, why I would gratefully want to learn to coach.

A painful upbringing does NOT EXCUSE my "WRONG" CHOICES; HOWEVER, it's trauma gives behavioral (emotional immaturity/ignorance) context. From before kindergarten, through the 10TH grade, I SUFFERED in some form & combination of mental, physical, & sexual abuse. IN SUCH A STATE, I GREW UP NOT ENGAGING in socially healthy relationships; THEREUPON—NUMBING ESCAPE FROM PAIN WAS DERIVED in alcohol, drugs, & ADVERSE STREET RACING. HAVING NEVER LEARNED to BE A MAN—THERE WAS NO FOUNDATION to BE A dad, brother, OR SON—LEADING to NOT BEING A CONTRIBUTING member of community societal-NEEDS. 

DESENSITIZED in SELFISH ignorance (unresolved emotional trauma), I had NO MORAL comprehension about compassionate empathy. Unjustifiably—I MURDERED two men accused of hurting my daughter & SCARING my extended family. My INSENSITIVE cataclysm of misery FOR THREE FAMILIES: Mr. KEVIN BARDIN'S; Mr. JOHN MOIR'S; & my own—all HAVE SUFFERED TREMENDOUSLY in myriad ways, GENERATIONALLY. 

 Accordingly, you-all's SACRIFICES of time, money, & soul ARE gratefully recognized—A PRICELESS INVESTMENT in rehabilitative learning—which I soulfully enjoy engaging in. EMPOWERING questions give clients the freedom of AN INDEPENDANT INDEPENDANCE; in other words, AS A COACH I'm NOT A CRUTCH—clients learn to walk in the freedom of AWARENESS within their own story's power. I always used to say, to those the Holy SPIRIT'S led me to help. The ANSWERS you SEEK ARE ALREADY in you, I'm just a trusted sounding board with A FEW leading offerings. UNTIL now I lacked A defining component—the skill of EMPOWERING questions.

 → OVER PLEASE →

Your formatative format has been invigorating for such passion in action. We have been blessed with deeply freeing awareness, which is a profoundly powerful inference. Questions in your format keep clients engaged; they recognize I'm bringing them questions based in their spoken truths. My clients have been imprisoned within prison, that is, they are imprisoned within their own misunderstood story's (unresolved emotional trauma factors). Coaching offers emotional awareness' freedom—recognizing old wounds of soul & their sustaining paradigms; consequently, we express vulnerability, & in so doing gain access to a healthier/fuller expression of our healing-self. In coaching sessions, I heartsee clients thawing from internal numbness & its cousin resistance, thus feeling safe in their humanity's healing & subsequent growth.

In conclusion, for the sake of gratitude, prudence denotes the caring importance of honorably acknowledging "Amanda, Damon, & Dave" by name. They have given above & beyond measure to help hurting souls here; furthermore, how would it be calculated—their extended blessings from our caring Heavenly Father—all those whom they train/teach will touch, & then they in turn touch in this great circle of life & humanity. In addition, it should be gratefully expounded about Amanda's & Damon's intriguing presentations, which are clearly weighted with substantial substance; moreover, their energetic emotional-animation of the content was in itself entertainingly disarming in its involving inclusiveness. Givenⁱⁿ me to be able to definitively believe, accept, & act upon the essence of what they shared. You-2 have given me such joy, for though I am hurt, nevertheless, in the knowledge & applied wisdom of "Coaching for Healing and Non-Violence"—I am treading the stormy waves of life, wearing the lifejacket of service.

In Jesus' supportive-care—

Your fellow brother,
Shadow Walker