Former Dealer Gets Sold on Life Change
by Zoe S. Erler

William had a lot to learn in an in-prison life-skills class taught by James. James says he had a lot to learn from William, too.

What It Takes to Be Tough
by Mark Divine

Prison culture emphasizes toughness. To you, that might mean hiding your feelings, not caring about other people, or throwing your weight around. I suggest that you consider a new definition of what it means to be tough.

Four Steps to Resilience

The first skill is breath control. When you are in a tense situation, consciously slow down your breathing. Bring in air through your nose and breathe with your diaphragm. Make sure your brain is getting oxygen, because stress restricts your breathing and clouds your thinking. In prolonged stressful situations, I recommend “box breathing” (see sidebar on page 2). The second skill is to take a step back. Observe what’s going on in your mental and emotional space and take charge of it. Don’t be a victim of your emotions.

The third skill is imagery. I teach SEALs to have a clear, positive vision of what they are trying to accomplish, like a North Star that guides their actions. If you can see in your mind what you want to achieve, you won’t get sucked into your enemy’s negativity. The fourth skill is goal setting. Select small, measurable tasks that will lead you toward the positive outcome you want to obtain. Having a radical focus on your mission is the Holy Grail of mental toughness. It will lead you to a cool, calm, collected, and emotionally stable state.

At first it may be hard to practice these skills. Each of us lives out of a story, a narrative that we were raised with. You might have grown up with a story that says you’re not smart, so there’s no point taking a test to get your GED. Or you might have heard a story that says you will never be a good parent, so there’s no point trying to stay out of prison and be a role model for your children. Like a movie script, stories drive our behaviors, but you don’t have to buy into the negative stories that might cause you to react negatively.

With constant practice, these skills can help you rewrite the
Guest Column: Cody Wilde

People often define resilience as bouncing back from difficulties. But that’s impossible. You can never bounce back to the way things were, because we are bound by time and experience, and both change. You are a different person now than you were before. You can, however, integrate your life experiences into the person you want to become. You may not be able to bounce back, but you can bounce through to the other side.

To be resilient, first you need to set a vision for who you want to be and decide which values will take you there. The second thing is to confront the ugliness right in front of you—the setbacks and risks in your own personal circumstances, or the lingering consequences of your mistakes. Most people gravitate toward one or the other. They set a pie-in-the-sky vision that doesn’t account for the facts they face, or they get too paralyzed by the weight of their present situation to imagine how things could be different. Resilience lies in setting a middle course that holds vision and present reality in tension—deciding who you want to become, and then choosing values that will guide you toward your goal, come what may. Principled perseverance and resilience are one and the same.

I have a friend, serving a 24-year sentence, who was a high-ranking gang member. He has a vision. He wants to incorporate positive values into his life, but he also knows that, when he gets out of prison, a number of people are going to want to harm him. The bounty on his head is the brutal fact he must struggle with. His greatest fear is that he will forsake his values.

I encourage my friend—and all you readers—to focus on building up your character. Internalize positive values until they become part of you. That way, in the moment of testing, you will be able to respond out of who you are—a new person—and you’ll be able to bounce through.

Cody Wilde has served as the program manager of InnerChange Freedom Initiative, a Prison Fellowship Academy, at MCF Lino Lakes since January 2015.

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**Quick Tips for Box Breathing**

“Box breathing” is an easy but effective tool to help you stay calm and balanced in the most stressful situations, like an extended stay in Ad-Seg.

**Step One:** Breathe in through your nostrils with your mouth closed. Hold your breath for four counts.

**Step Two:** Breathe out slowly for four counts. Hold your exhale for four counts.

**Step Three:** After four or five rounds of breathing in and out, when you are holding your inhale and your exhale, mentally recite something positive, like, “Day by day, in every way, I’m getting better and stronger.” When I was in training as a SEAL, I liked to say, “I’m feeling good, I’m looking good, I’m too good to be in Hollywood.”

**Step Four:** Do 15 or 20 rounds, which will take seven or eight minutes. Visualize yourself in your happiest, most positive, and most productive future state, moving beyond that challenges that are plaguing you in this moment. Done regularly, box breathing will have a pronounced, profound impact on your physiology and psychology, bringing your body and mind back into balance.

**“I felt like everything was in slow motion. ... The police were screaming and hollering.”**

> “Investing in people’s lives can make a really positive difference,” says James. He and William remain friends to this day.
Finding Strength to Be Real

by E.G. Andrews

It’s been 20 years since Prison Fellowship Field Director Deborah Daniels was behind bars in Alabama—as a prisoner, that is. She’s often back in prison these days, serving regularly with Offender Alumni Association (OAA) volunteers. She formally founded the group in 2015 as a support system for returning citizens and their families, helping them mobilize as volunteers and leaders in the community.

After all, Deborah says, “Who can walk with me better than someone who has already been in my shoes?”

It all begins in organized support groups called forums, where people come together to share their stories and help each other move forward. A forum is a safe place to find peer-to-peer support, solve mutual dilemmas, and share known resources. Attendees may come from different backgrounds, but they often have similar hurts, fears, and weaknesses.

“Watching some of these men that have done a considerable time in prison walk into one of our groups… you can just see the apprehension and uncertainty of what their life is going to be like,” says Deborah. “They’re just looking for something to grab hold of and connect with.”

The newly returning citizens gain wisdom and networking opportunities from other former prisoners who are already stable, working, and connected within the local community. The process generates a cycle of “offenders helping offenders,” Deborah explains. Seasoned members of the group will connect with newcomers, call them on the phone regularly, and invite them back for Monday meetings and Saturday service projects.

“We want the community to see us as a body,” says Deborah. “I actually do something together to give back, despite our struggles.”

Space for Something Greater

It’s never easy to be honest about your struggles and ask for help. But at OAA, it’s not about pretending to be perfect. It’s not even about trying to be. Rather, it’s about being honest in the midst of challenges, and seeking strength outside yourself.

Yet even in the most supportive community like OAA, some challenges, situations, and experiences can seem too difficult and overwhelming to bear.

In the Bible, the Apostle Paul writes honestly about his own struggle with weakness. We don’t know specifics, but we know that Paul pleads with God to take his weakness away—and God could, but He doesn’t.

God does something even more powerful. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul writes, “Each time [God] said, ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.’ So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me.”

Paul goes on to explain that he can not only endure weakness, but also be thankful in the midst of it. For while Paul’s weakness was great, God’s strength would always be greater. That weakness would make space for God to show His strength in Paul’s life—for Paul’s good, and God’s glory.

The Secret to Strength

God doesn’t always work the way we expect Him to. When He sent Jesus Christ into the world 2,000 years ago, it was hardly an impressive spectacle. Jesus, the Son of God, was born in a stable, to a poor young girl and a carpenter. He received a welcoming party of barn animals and lowly shepherds. His 33 years of teaching, healing, and service projects did not make an impressive spectacle. Jesus was rejected, marked by ridicule and loneliness, and it all ended in a horrific, shameful death on a cross.

But that’s where God showed His power yet again, when Jesus rose from the dead after three days in the tomb. The book of Hebrews says that Jesus is our mediator—God in human form, and our direct connection to God—who is familiar with our struggles and weaknesses as humans. He experienced similar circumstances, all for our sake. When He died and rose again, He paid the price for everything we have done wrong and conquered death forever, so that we could be forgiven and have a restored relationship with Him. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we can come confidently as we are—weaknesses, fears, broken pasts—and open our hands to receive God’s gift of grace. If we will walk with Him, He promises to give us His strength every step of the way. And, like our friend Deborah says, “Who can walk with me better than someone who has already been in my shoes?”

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WHERE DOES STRENGTH COME FROM?

It’s never easy to open up about your struggles and admit your need for help. But if we aren’t honest with ourselves and with God, we will never find the strength we need.

The Bible tells us that we are all imperfect. We have all failed, and we are all broken—and we are not strong enough to save ourselves. But because of Jesus’ great love for us, we don’t have to. We can find new strength and new hope in the midst of our struggles. If you want to do that today, you can start with a prayer like this:

God, I have been relying on my own strength. I realize that only You are strong enough to save me. Thank You that, because of Jesus, Your grace covers everything I’ve done. Please give me the strength to walk with You.

If you’d like to learn more about what it means to have a relationship with God through Jesus, Inside Journal would love to help. Just write to “Where Does Strength Come From?” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. We will send you information about a free correspondence Bible study available from one of our trusted partner organizations.
An Entrepreneur’s Key to Happiness

by A.R. Quinn

Gene and Irene Medley run a successful scrap-metal recycling business in Colorado, as well as a nonprofit that helps the homeless, returning citizens, and the working poor. The Medleys are glad to serve; they know what it’s like for people and families affected by crime and incarceration. Recently they sat down with Inside Journal to share their remarkable story of struggle, redemption, and resilience.

IJ: What’s your background?

George: I started going to jail when I was about 10, and I quit going to jail when I was 38. During that timeframe, I was either in jail, out on bond, or on my way back in. I have been arrested at least 50 times. I met Irene when I was in my mid-20s. I was actually on the run as a fugitive, because I had caught a drug case. When I was in New Mexico, a guy took me to a house party, and I met Irene. We got married in Las Vegas under an alias in 1998. Her family found out who I was because I was being chased across New Mexico by the U.S. Marshals. Irene thought she had married a guy named “Dave Montana.” Then her family saw my face on TV. The “Dave Montana.” Then her family found out who I was, because I was being chased across New Mexico by the U.S. Marshals.

Irene: I went to see him in prison. “Georgia is not the Georgia I know.” “Georgia is different.” “Georgia has changed.” “Georgia has surrendered to God.”

IJ: When did things finally turn around for you?

George: It was Veterans Day 2004. I got a year in jail for stealing a car. It was the only time I got found guilty of something I actually didn’t do! During that time my wife Irene was by herself. I wasn’t there to help her with the bills. One day the sheriff came to the door and said, “Does anybody want to go to church or bible study?” I just wanted to get out of my cell. When I got there, it was just me and the volunteer. He said, “Your problem is you haven’t surrendered to God.” I went back to my cell and read a tract someone had thrown on the floor. I had thought money and possessions were the key to happiness. I started recalling all the bad things I had done in my life—for three days. It was like watching a video in my mind’s eye of all the things I did and all the people I hurt. I felt bad that I left my wife like that. I flipped open a Bible to Matthew 6:33, and read, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God.” I felt peace come over me. It was the craziest thing. I started going to Bible study in that jail. People though I was crazy.

Irene: I went to see him in jail. Before every time he was around me, he was strung out on drugs. I was always holding my breath because of the cusping. He couldn’t even finish a sentence when he was strung out.

This time he was different. He asked me how I was doing. He had never done that before. He looked good. He was just a new creation, and I could tell. I still doubted, because you think, “When he gets out, he’s going back to using.” So that trust wasn’t there. I made an arrangement with God. I said, “I will follow my husband if he is following You.” George was following Jesus, and it was miraculous. It was about a year before I could trust. God worked it out for us. I had prayed all the time through the years, and God was good to us.

IJ: You’ve come a long way. Now you are running a successful business and serving the community. How have your past experiences made you stronger?

George: I would say the hard times where we had to rely on God, that’s been the best experience. Making mistakes has been a good experience, training us to not give up no matter how bad things look. I’ve been an entrepreneur my whole life. When I sold drugs, I wanted to be the best drug dealer. Even when I was a kid, I used to cut grass, and I would get paid a dollar, a Budweiser, and a Pall Mall. I always had a business of a different kind, because God gave me a gift of being an entrepreneur a long time ago. I used it to do evil, and I used to brag about being a career criminal. I thought I was smart, but I was an idiot. Once I realized that I needed to use my skills for good, God really promoted us. Also I had a lot of really good people around me. I have an 8th grade education. It’s pretty rare for someone without an education to be as successful as we are. It’s because of God.

Irene: If God can do it for George, than everyone’s got a shot. Some of us been tough to move forward, but you can’t give up. You need to keep on going and persevere.

Building a Future That Lasts

by E.G. Andrews

Gene Manigo answers the phone with a friendly hel¬lo, over a muffled blend of radio tunes and craftsmen’s tools. “Hold on, I’m in the shop,” he says. “Let me get over to my office.”

Better known as Gene, he designs and crafts wood furniture for a small business in Brooklyn, New York. He seems unconcerned that a phone call has interrupted his work day— he makes his own hours, he chucks. He’s the owner. And it all started with the skill he’d brought with him out of prison.

Gene had served 30 years in prison before he began serving the public with wood-working. His case manager encouraged him to apply to Refoundry, an innovative nonprofit launched in early 2015 to empower the reentry community by giving them opportunities to turn recycled materials into objects with purpose and beauty.

Housed at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Refoundry doesn’t really teach skills; it shows people how to develop and use them.

“We believe that everybody is born with skills and talents and creativity,” says Tommy Safian, co-founder and execu¬tive director at Refoundry. “This place is designed to integrate people back into soci¬ety, and to have that society integrated with them.”

There’s something powerful about repurposing dis¬carded materials, Tommy says. “These people often feel like they have no purpose,” Tommy says. “These people often feel like they have no purpose.”

Refoundry participants are paid, understanding that the harder they work, the more they produce. The more they produce, the more they get paid. Craftsmen sell their original handiwork weekly at Brooklyn Flea, a well-known local market. That’s where many of them, like Gene, start attracting a customer base before moving on from Refoundry. By the time they’ve launched out on their own, they are more confident in their ability to actually run a business. Not all of them pursue jobs as craftsmen after Refoundry, but their experiences still help them succeed in a variety of work environments.

For Gene, sticking with carpentry was an easy deci¬sion. But it’s not just about his business anymore. Since beginning his journey at Refoundry, Gene has made it a point to help other up¬and-coming craftsmen find a second chance. He also re¬cently completed a chaplaincy program, hoping to go behind the walls and mentor other men starting new careers. And that mission is as solid as the reclaimed wood he crafts with. “The things I make out of wood can last,” Gene says, with earnest pride. “The wood may be old, but I can make it into something brand new that lasts for a long time. I want to help others do the same.”

Tommy Safian agrees—it’s about starting people on a journey that lasts beyond the Brooklyn Navy Yard. “One of our participants said, ‘Re¬foundry opened the door, I walked through, and I can take it from here.’ That’s the es¬sence of what we’re doing.”

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