How a Struggling Single Mom Found True Riches

by A.R. Quinn

I was never able to be just an innocent child,” says Michelle Payette. Her father was an abusive man with legal troubles. Those troubles eventually drove Michelle and her family from Illinois, her birthplace, to the racetrack town of Saratoga Springs, New York. Soon after, her parents got divorced, and Michelle’s mother married a man who was a convicted felon, though Michelle didn’t know it until much later. He ran an automotive shop that kept two sets of books. Michelle grew up thinking that it wasn’t quite legal, but she figured that was just the way business was done. Her life lacked stability. To top it off, her mother was depressed.

By the time she was 13, Michelle was spending her evenings in a bar, piling on makeup and pretending to be much older. She parted hard with the rock stars who came through town. At 21, Michelle married an older man and had her first child, a daughter. She settled into motherhood and worked for a salon. On the outside, she had the appearance of success—a nice house, a car, a family. But her marriage was unhealthy, and when she got pregnant again, her husband didn’t want the baby. Michelle ended that pregnancy, but the decision left her depressed—and she was told she’d be unable to conceive again.

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How to Find Your Passions Behind Bars

by Stacia Ray

You are so much more than just some prison ID number. You’re a unique person with gifts and talents. Using these talents in the form of a regular hobby can keep your mind sharp and help lower stress. But how do you even pursue your hobbies with limited resources?

Inside Journal reviewed research articles, blogs, and personal stories to create a list of tips on how to find your passion while incarcerated.

1. Remember your childhood.
   What activities brought you joy when you were younger? Even those of us with unhealthy childhoods had hobbies and passions. Did you love to draw? Were you good at sports? Acting, writing, reading, playing an instrument? Think back to what gave you fulfillment as a very young child and find a way to recreate that as an adult. That might mean exercising in your cell, joining a prison music program, drawing every day, or starting a book club or theater group.

2. Ask others to list your best qualities.
   Find a few trusted friends and ask them what your strengths are. Then use those answers to find your passion. If most of your friends agree you’re great at math, create your own Sudoku book or offer to help tutor someone in math*. If most of your friends agree you’re a funny storyteller, start a journal or write a screenplay or stand-up routine. The added bonus of getting feedback from friends is that you can use this information to improve yourself. If you’re told you have the gift of gab, ask yourself if you sometimes talk too much and could stand to work on your listening skills.

3. Find inspiration in others.
   If you hear a song that touches your soul, ask yourself what it was about that song you loved so much. Was it the lyrics? Try poetry. Was it the sound of the instruments? Try finding books in the

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“I was convinced, even though I didn’t really have a relationship with Christ, that God was punishing me,” she remembers.

In too deep
Michelle’s marriage fell apart after that. She fell back on wilder habits and went to the Bahamas with a younger man. She got pregnant and eventually became an alcoholic. She got pregnant with her son, but it felt comfortable with him. Sue, a friend from church, told her plainly, “Michelle, you’ve got to stop lying. There’s an old saying, ‘The truth will set you free.’”

Ready to be free from her web of lies, Michelle told the district attorney what she’d done. She was offered two to six years in state prison.

Living with integrity
“Everything changed the day I went into lock-up,” says Michelle. The girl in the next cell was suffering through heroin withdrawal. To comfort her, Michelle, who despite going to church had not yet accepted Jesus into her life, started reading aloud from a Bible.

As she moved from one state prison to another, Michelle turned an empty closet into a Christian reading room and played the piano for chapel services. In 2011, Michelle helped with the Angel Tree sign-up at her facility, so that mothers could make sure their children received a Christmas gift. Michelle’s daughter was already grown, but her son was 11. He received his first Angel Tree gift that year. He began going to church and would tell Michelle about Jesus during their phone calls.

“My son led me to that close, personal relationship [with Jesus Christ], and it was all due to him receiving that Angel Tree gift,” she remembers.

Michelle went home on April 27, 2012, with $40 and a bus ticket to her name. As she got her life re-established, Michelle contacted Prison Fellowship and eventually became an Angel Tree volunteer. In 2017, she was hired as an Angel Tree program specialist and was promoted to Angel Tree field director a year later. She now helps make sure that thousands of children just like hers get a Christmas gift and a message of love from Mom or Dad. It hasn’t been easy, but Michelle has paid back nearly every penny that she owed, and last year, she bought her own home again. She has moved past the lies that were part of her past. And though she might make less money than she did breaking the law, she doesn’t mind.

“Everything I need is here,” she says. “I’m paying taxes. I’m doing it legally. I got custody of my son back. And I feel richer today than I did back then.”

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• City, State, ZIP

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WHO ARE YOU? WHOSE ARE YOU?
by Stacia Ray

Throughout your life, you’ve been described by others. You’ve been given different titles and identities, whether you liked them or not. When you’re in prison, you get called Inmate. Before prison, you might have been called Store Manager. Or maybe Gang Leader, or Parolee, or Mom. Some people get titles based on rank. Others get titles based on reputation. But words like “addict” or “thief” describe how someone behaves, not who someone is.

So the big question becomes: Who even are you? Is your identity found in someone else’s opinion of you? Or in how much money you make or your latest achievement? If that were true, your identity would change depending on the circumstances of the moment.

An unshakable identity
Thankfully, your most important identity isn’t based on mood or circumstance. That identity is firm: You are God’s creation.

Does God measure people based on how “good” they’ve been lately? Does He like you more if you’ve been reading the Bible or going to chapel? The answer is “no.” He loves us with no strings attached. He says if we accept Him into our lives, then we are His children. Your identity as a child of God can’t be stolen from you. It isn’t earned by your actions or stripped away by your mistakes. It isn’t based on what other people think of you. And God doesn’t value you based on how well-behaved you were as a kid, or what crimes you’ve committed, or how hard you pray. You can be secure in your identity as a child of God in an insecure world.

Imagining the most loving parent. Would that parent stop loving their child if that child misbehaved? No. Sure, the parent would guide the child, teach the child, or discipline the child. But no matter how badly the kid messed up, the parent would still love that child unconditionally. And God’s love for us is even more perfect than the most loving parent we can imagine.

Sometimes, God’s children focus too much on being “good,” as if God will love them more if they try harder. But your identity doesn’t come from how well you “perform” as a Christian. If you aren’t yet good at talking to God through prayer or hearing from God through reading the Bible, you don’t suddenly lose your identity as a child of God. That being said, if you pray and read the Bible regularly, it will strengthen your relationship with the Lord. And it will bring you a better sense of spiritual discipline to lean into God’s peace more easily. Just like a child grows up and matures, so does a child of God.

Not easier, but better
Let’s get something straight. When you finally identify yourself as a child of God, that does not mean you will now have an easy, trouble-free life. Nowhere in the Bible does it say we’ll have fewer problems or be more well-adjusted if we follow Jesus. In fact, Matthew 10:22 even says, “And all nations will hate you because you are my followers.” And 1 Peter 4:12 says, “Dear friends, don’t be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you.”

But hold on—there’s more to those verses! Matthew 10:22 continues, “But everyone who endures to the end will be saved.” And 1 Peter 4:14 goes on to say, “If [people insult you] because you bear the name of Christ, you will be blessed, for the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you.”

The next time the world is trying to insult you or define you, just remember that you are a child of God. And that is all the identity you will ever need.

IDENTITY CHALLENGE:
How quickly can you solve this crossword? Answers on p.4.

ACROSS:
1. The Bourne Identity actor: ____ Damon.
3. A ____ certificate is issued when you are born.
6. A booklet used to travel internationally.
8. Me ____ and I.
10. Opposite of “FOUND.”
12. The male version of “DAUGHTER.”
13. The identity card required to drive a car.

DOWN:
2. Popular credit card (not MasterCard).
3. Musicians John, Paul, George, and Ringo: The ____.
4. “Christian” literally means “of ____”.
5. Opposite of “ME.”
7. Clark Kent is the secret identity of ____.

RECIPE CORNER
Prison Lasagna Supreme
(submitted by James Grindle, South Carolina)

INGREDIENTS:
2 cans of ravioli
1 can of mushrooms, drained and dried
1 spicy beef sausage, diced
1 small onion, diced
1 spicy beef sausage, diced
1 can of mushrooms, drained and dried
2 cans of ravioli

*Mix mushrooms, sausage, onion, and green pepper in bowl. Microwave on high for five minutes. Put a layer of ravioli in the bottom of a second bowl. Add several spoonfuls of mushroom mixture over ravioli. Next, sprinkle a bag of Cheez-Its and a half package of Captain’s Waters. Then layer with sliced cheese. Continue the layering process until all ingredients are used. Finish with a final layer of sliced cheese and crushed Cheez-Its. Heat in microwave for 5-6 minutes or until cheese is melted. Let sit for a few minutes and enjoy.

*Be sure to comply with your facility’s rules and regulations whenever cooking.

ARE YOU GOOD ENOUGH?
How do you know if you’re “good enough”?
In 2 Corinthians 12:9, God says, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” In Him, you are good enough! No need to earn God’s love or to seek approval from others. Rest in the peace that God’s grace is a free gift, and if you have accepted Jesus into your life as your savior, your identity as a child of God is solid. If you’re not sure how to receive God’s grace, start with this simple prayer:

“Dear God, please show me that Your grace is all I need. Help me stop trying to find my identity in others’ opinions, or in how ‘good’ I’m doing. Let me be content in who I am as Your child.”

To discover how to follow Jesus, sign up for a free correspondence Bible study through one of our trusted partner organizations. Just write “My Identity” to Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. To learn more about free correspondence Bible courses, see offer on page 2.
Finding Your Identity from the Inside Out

Many of our readers will be released at some point. But who will you be on the outside? Inside Journal spoke with Prison Fellowship Academy Reentry Manager Tom Lundquist about finding your identity after release: both your literal identity (ID cards and bank accounts) and your figurative identity (value and purpose).

Inside Journal: After being released, how can someone get a driver’s license or other identifying documents?

Tom Lundquist: There’s such a spectrum of how things work, depending on your conditions of release. Reentry services vary from county to county. Some counties have “wraparound” reentry services. Many prisons have transitional services. In Minnesota prisons, the DOC has transition coordinators that assist in obtaining IDs, birth certificates, and driver’s licenses, even paying some fees for you. Before you do anything, first find out what your permissions are from your parole agents. Then, based on your situation, you can start finding the right resources to help you.

IJ: What about opening a bank account and managing money after release?

TL: When someone is released from prison, the money that they earned in prison is put into an account. They'll have money on their books and be given a debit card. That card can be used right after release. If you walk into a bank, you may get coaching there as far as how to open a bank account. For a credit card, you might have to start off with a bank credit card. That’s OK in the beginning. It keeps your money all in one spot.

IJ: How can someone learn the latest technology and find the right apps, especially someone who has been incarcerated a long time?

TL: I’ve noticed that if newly released citizens don’t have restrictions against a smartphone, they’ll often get one the day after release. A smartphone opens up all sorts of options. You may need coaching on how to use a smartphone. If your prison has a mentor, that’s a great way to get help. Otherwise, some cities have community organizations that will also walk you through things like how to get access to bus cards, which banks are best to open an account in. Once you get a smartphone, you’ll have a lot more options, with banking apps, organizing apps, all kinds of helpful apps—even ride-share apps to help get to a job interview.

IJ: What tips can you share for the post-release job search?

TL: When it comes to finding work, if you have conditions that prevent you from accessing the internet, you’ll need to find a workforce center. Those are places where you can go in and people will coach you on the internet. And it’s all filtered, so you can’t access things that are too personal or improper, but you can access email. Also, some states have good resources for finding felon-friendly jobs. In some states, the workforce centers have staff trained to assist formerly incarcerated men and women to find jobs that are not as impacted by their past felony convictions.

IJ: What else is helpful for finding your identity on the outside?

TL: A good faith community. People are much less at risk of relapse or returning to any kind of criminal activity if they find friendships in a church home, and especially a church that’s welcoming to former prisoners. In prison, people often place their faith in Jesus and find their identity in Him. And that relationship with Jesus involves other people, to help anchor and deepen their values. Well, that’s even more critical when you leave prison. In prison or jail, there aren’t as many temptations, you have more time on your hands, and you can study a lot. But when you’re released, you have a wider range of decisions to make, and you don’t have the level of people keeping you in check. Without a network of support, it’s a lot harder to stay on the right path. People who find community on the outside tend to do well. People who don’t find community tend to struggle.

IJ: How long does the reentry process take?

TL: Figuring out who you are in Christ, or who you are as a person, takes time. Several former prisoners I worked with told me it took them a year after getting out to find out who they are. In fact, research says it takes three years on average to get stabilized. Sifting through the temptations, the freedoms, the stresses, and the faith piece can be a slow process of transformation. You might even flourish for a while but then start to drift. One man after his release started off attending a huge church but didn’t find any friendships there. He wondered if simply attending church but not getting to know other people is what Christianity on the outside was supposed to look like. But then he found a smaller church with real friendships. This church was also very intentional in welcoming those who were incarcerated. It says in 2 Chronicles 15:7, “But as for you, be strong and courageous, for your work will be rewarded.” Be patient with yourself and include others in your reentry process. Pursue your identity, find your community, and build your support.

For help finding employment after your release, start with job search websites like indeed.com and 70millionjobs.com. Also visit prisonfellowship.org/resources and scroll down to the section called “Preparing for Reentry.” There, you will find a lot of resources, including tools on job searching and writing a resume, tips for family, books to check out, a national directory for reentry, and more. Be sure to follow all your release conditions and parole rules.

Crossword: ANSWER KEY

V I S I T E R S
C H E C K P O S T E R
M Y S E L F T I M E
S O N D E R L I C E N S E
B I R T H E A T E R
P A S S P O R T
M Y S E L F L O S T
L U P E R
M A T T E R
T E R A D A
I N G
C R Y P T O
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D E C R Y P T O
N O T A R Y
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