

AS A PRISONER
THINKETH

Carl B. Brock

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“For man is man and master of his fate”

—Lord Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (1859)

INTRODUCTION

Achievement, of whatever kind, is the crown of effort, the diadem of thought.

—James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh* (1903)

Hello, reader. My name is Carl. I'd like to thank you for taking the time to give this small book of mine a chance. *As A Prisoner Thinketh* is the product of much thought and consideration and is written from the humble perspective of myself as a prisoner. The title is a tribute to the late author James Allen (1864–1912), as well as a great piece of work that he wrote, *As a Man Thinketh*. I would like to make it

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clear that my book is not written as an expansion on Allen's writings, nor would I attempt to compare it to any of those that he wrote.

As A Prisoner Thinketh is a group of essays that I wrote from ideas and thoughts that were inspired while reading and studying works written by authors like Allen and then making conscious observations about myself, life, love, friendship, family, prison, spirituality, and countless other things.

I advise you to read this book with an open mind so that you can appreciate the perspective from which I write: behind the walls of federal prison. I hope and pray that these thoughts of mine can do some good in your life, help you produce worthwhile thoughts, and, if necessary, initiate meaningful change.

I know that this book will meet some resistance along the way because a prisoner wrote it. I am just glad to be able to share it with anyone I can. I think that even if a person does

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not agree with everything I have to say, he or she will be able to at least gain something positive out of the experience.

I wish you all peace and prosperity.

—Carl B. Brock

REDEFINING YOUR LEGACY

“Man is manacled only by himself. Thought and action are the jailers of Fate—they imprison, being base. They are also the angels of Freedom—they liberate, being noble.”

—James Allen, *As a Man Thinketh* (1903)

Many people in prison seem to have trouble moving forward with their lives. The reason is, in part, that they put too much stock into their past.

People tend to use past failures and bad decisions as tools of resistance that hamper their

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ability and resolve to create better lives. Indeed, it is important to know where you came from, just as it is important to accept what you have or have not done, for better or worse. Yet a dark past does not have to set the stage for the future.

As to those in prison who can't seem to move forward, the root of their resistance is typically their willingness to allow their cloudy pasts to define who they are and where they are going. If you were to ask one of these people, "What are you going to do once you get out of prison?" a common response is, "I'll do what I can do, which probably won't be much, considering my criminal record."

It is sad because this statement is both true and false at the same time. If a prisoner holds his criminal record to be his legacy, then indeed, he probably won't do much in life besides more prison time. But if the prisoner were to consider his or her criminal record as a short chapter in a large book, then this type of statement would

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likely prove to be false because a prisoner with this mind-set would probably find the motivation and determination to create a legacy that outshines his or her grim past.

As long as we are alive, we still have time to think, say, or do things differently. While we may have burned bridges, broken hearts, and hurt many people, we can still change. Although we cannot always fix what has been broken or make things the way they used to be, we can still move forward with a positive attitude and make the right choices in the future. The wrongs of our past don't control what we think, say, or do—only we control those things.

For instance, there is a man named Joe. He spent two decades in prison for all sorts of federal crimes. While Joe did his time, he pursued higher knowledge and sought to educate and discipline himself. He taught himself the legal system and informally studied law. It was not long before Joe realized that law was a subject he enjoyed

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learning and that he had a knack for conducting legal research and drafting court filings.

Joe eventually became what is known as a “jailhouse lawyer.” He helped other prisoners work on their criminal cases, file lawsuits for gross injustices, and fill out tedious and complicated forms for matters like estates, trusts, marriages, and divorces. Once Joe got out of prison, he went on to let go of the ways of his past. He started his very own legal research center and now makes an honest and prosperous living as a paralegal. You could say that Joe has found his way. He has created a new and better life for himself despite his past.

A past that we are not proud of does not have to define us and/or where we are going. We can take control of our lives and redefine our legacies. So let me repeat what I said earlier: as long as we are alive, we can change the way we think, the words that come out of our mouths, and the way we act.

BE A TRUE LEADER

“The art of leadership is saying no, not yes.
It is very easy to say yes.”

—Tony Blair, *Mail on Sunday* (1994)

Being a true leader is not as hard as it may sound. The first step is to realize that you have the potential to be one. The next step is to choose a direction in which to lead.

I myself have never been a follower, though I was never much of a leader, either. I was like a ship at sea with no captain at the helm: I went where the wind blew but never with much purpose or direction.

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I've found from experience that it is not until you know what you stand for and what you want in life that you can determine your direction in life. This is part of what reveals your destination. Once you know these things about yourself and can hold them with confidence and conviction, the choices and decisions you make will begin to point you in a direction.

True leaders know what and who they are. They know where they are going and understand where they are from. This is why a true leader is unlikely to succumb to peer pressure.

Followers, on the other hand, usually have no idea about who they are or what they stand for. Followers are usually content with leaning on someone they perceive as stronger or smarter than themselves, rather than making their own way. True leaders are quite the opposite of followers in this regard because they'd rather follow their own stars, even if it's a lonelier or more difficult route to travel.

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It was not long in life before it dawned on me that I had the potential to become a leader, but it was not until I was many years into my prison sentence before I finally decided who I was and where I actually wanted to go. Once I decided what my principles, belief system, and spirituality were, I knew what I stood for. And once I knew what I stood for, it was a lot easier for me to determine what my goals, ambitions, and aspirations were.

Disorder and chaos are impossible to eliminate, but life becomes more stable and organized when you come to know yourself. Once you know who you are, it seems as though the pathway is lit. Now you have a sense of purpose. Now you have direction. Now you can move forward with confidence and conviction. And you can take my word for it: once you do, there will be plenty of followers.

KNOW WHAT YOU STAND FOR

“Man is a credulous animal, and must believe something; in the absence of good grounds for belief, he will be satisfied with bad ones.”

—Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays* (1950)

If you lack confidence or purpose in life, it is probably because you don't know what you stand for.

If you don't know what you stand for, you have no foundation to stand on and thus lack conviction in your choices and decisions. This causes fear, stress, insecurity, and anxiety. To

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solve this, we must look inside ourselves to find out who we truly are.

The wisdom offered here is for us to individually make conscious observations of the inner workings of our own hearts and minds so that we can refer to them when such life choices and decisions are to be made. Each person needs to acknowledge and define what he or she holds to be true or false and right or wrong. We each have our very own beliefs, spirituality, sense of justice, and honor. Once we figure out what these are, we have our own individual foundation to stand on.

A person who stands on something knows when to stand for something. These things on which we stand are our principles. These principles help form our core beliefs. And these core beliefs are what outline a person's code of ethics. Once we have acknowledged and defined these things in ourselves, we can make choices and decisions with confidence.

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When we know what we stand for, we have a good idea of who we are. This type of person is unlikely to be manipulated or pressured into doing something that he or she will regret later. In fact, the connivers and schemers are likely to look elsewhere for easier prey. A person of principles is not easily misled or enticed—he or she is usually the one who does the leading and influences others. What I am telling you here is to give yourself a certain code to live by. Think of a blackjack dealer in a casino. When the dealer's cards add up to sixteen or less, he will deal him or herself another card without hesitation. Dealers don't have to ask, "Should I?" or "Shouldn't I?" because they play with a never-changing set of rules that were established well before that particular game ever began. As a result, they know what they must do with every hand of cards because these firm rules guide their moves. Therefore, they can play the game with confidence and conviction.

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The lesson here is to know what you stand for in order to have something to stand on. And once you do, just like the blackjack dealer does on seventeen or greater, you can stand very strong indeed.

MAINTAINING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

“As iron sharpens iron,
so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend
[to show rage or worthy purpose].”

—Proverbs 27:17, *Amplified Bible*

Certain people are not good company; this is why we should avoid being around them. Just as a person can sharpen the countenance of another, so can a person dull another’s

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countenance. Ask yourself: how many of your friends, family, and associates are assisting you in becoming successful? Would you say that any of them are wasting your time and distracting you from maturing intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually?

Think about each person you interact with on a daily or regular basis. Examine the nature of the conversations that you have with each and the substance of the topics about which you talk. Can you honestly say that each is a healthy and meaningful relationship?

Or would you have to admit that there is at least one person who always interrupts your progress and productivity? There may be more than one person in your group who does this. This seems to be a regular problem that many high school and college students have. Rather than surrounding themselves with motivated and goal-oriented pals, they allow their social circles to be full of underachievers.

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Why, in our culture, is it OK to settle for less than one's potential? Why do certain people in society frown on someone for changing or progressing?

In order to achieve greatness, we need to distance ourselves from those who choose less in life. This is a necessary sacrifice that we must accept in order to be able to invest the necessary attention into whatever we want to obtain.

If a person desires little in life, then he or she will naturally associate with these types of people instead of separating him or herself from them. But if you desire what is not common, a type of greatness, then you will need to keep these people at a distance or somehow remove them from your circle. If you allow these kinds of people (see the next chapter, "Naysayers, Dream Killers, and Distraction Devices") to stay in your company, they will likely do everything in their powers to divert you from your goals and progress.

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We must understand that some people just don't want better for us or for themselves. If they did, they would help us achieve what we desire and aspire to, rather than slow us down or continuously distract us from our potential.

True leaders neither allow themselves to be led by a lesser person—unless they wish to become lesser—nor lower themselves to other people's levels, especially for the sake of social acceptance. They instead require people to raise their standards to theirs.

If you wish for another to train, assist, or mold you, you must make the necessary changes in yourself so as to help, rather than resist, that person's efforts.

The fool cannot lead the wise, nor can the wise man lead the fool. But the wise can become fools by following the foolish.

Ultimately, we must sharpen each other. I sharpen you, or you sharpen me. If no one is

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being sharpened in the relationship, then someone or both parties are being dulled. And to be dulled is to live below one's potential.

NAYSAYERS, DREAM KILLERS, AND DISTRACTION DEVICES

“Change is not made without inconvenience,
even from worse to better.”

—Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the
English Language* (1755)

It may sound strange, but at times there are more people than you realize who want you to remain the same you, without progress or change.

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I'm not talking about the people who are genuine and want the best for you. I am talking about those who appear to genuinely care for you but actually only care about what is best for them. These people are thus known as Naysayers, Dream Killers, and Distraction Devices.

These disingenuous people want to maintain the status quo. They usually aren't interested in change themselves and definitely don't want to see anyone around them change. My theory as to why is that these people are living their lives based on fears, such as insecurity, apprehension, or uncertainty. Moreover, if you change, the pressure is on for them to change.

Here is a story about two obese men I know named Jim and Zach. They have been friends their whole lives, and then one day Zach decides to take the necessary steps to get healthy and in better physical shape. When Zach does this, it changes the entire nature of their relationship. They go from enjoying the same unhealthy meals

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and low-energy entertainment to Zach's suddenly eating new, healthier meals and trying out more active forms of recreation. This exposes Zach to new people, new ideas, and new principles.

In turn, the change makes Jim insecure since he's not ready to make any alterations to his life. His insecurity causes him to try to dissuade Zach from his new lifestyle. He uses negative feedback and makes numerous attempts to entice Zach into returning to his old eating habits and lazy leisure activities. Eventually, Zach realizes what is happening and decides to quit spending time with Jim. This scenario happens quite often when a person is trying to improve his or her life. I've seen people respond very negatively to many changes that you would think would prompt encouragement and positive reinforcement. One example would be when a man tries to quit smoking. Or maybe it's a woman trying to save money or get out of debt. In prison, this often happens to someone trying to quit drugs or stop

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gambling. Another common story in prison is when a guy is trying to understand or pursue his spirituality and religious beliefs. This last scenario typically attracts plenty of misgivings from others, because for various reasons people hate to see someone get so-called jailhouse religion.

There are different kinds of people who try to keep others from changing. There are the Naysayers, who like to sow seeds of doubt and negativity about everything. There are the Dream Killers, who try to convince people that what they want, aspire to, or seek is not possible. And then there are those who act as Distraction Devices, deliberately trying to interfere with a person's progress and productivity.

I have experienced them all. These people want us to remain the same person forever for their own selfish reasons and purposes. Some are subtle with their manipulations, while others are brazen and bold.

I've learned that if you want to progress,

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change, or evolve, then you must prepare yourself for resistance. It is the people closest to you who can really cause you the most problems and inconveniences.

The road to change can be a lonely journey. It can be full of pain and heartbreak, especially since people will reveal their true nature to you along the way. Their true colors may turn out to be something that you don't find agreeable. But we must be strong and move forward with confidence and conviction. Nothing is easy in life, especially change, and that is why so few ever achieve it.

Instead of changing with us or supporting our progress and accomplishments, some people in our circles would rather become obstacles in our way. In these situations, we must be firm and assertive. We cannot allow these people to negatively affect our hope or determination. The reality is that we must make the right choices for ourselves, based on what future we want. We

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must not allow others to distract, manipulate, or cause us to lose our resolve.

True friends or genuine loved ones will support us in our change. They will want us to do better and live healthier. They want us to do what is right and would never try to make us fall or relapse, and they would not try to entice us or influence us in negative ways. Instead, they would encourage our metamorphosis, even if the path we take is not for them, just as we would do for them in return.

But the Naysayers, Dream Killers, and Distraction Devices won't be able to do this: they need us to stay the same. And if we don't separate ourselves from such people, we most likely will stay the same indeed.