

In His Own Words

Everyone's experience upon leaving prison is different. Mine was colors. I had forgotten the colors. My world had been shades of gray. Gray steel, gray concretes. Gray clothes. Faded blues.

I stepped out that morning into bright yellow sun. Greens and orange. Pinks. A swirl of warm shades. No one noticed I was overwhelmed by the sounds of the happy colors. It was so loud in my head.

A small crowd of people bounced up and down in the prison parking lot. For many years I thought it wrong to celebrate upon release – too many others wouldn't be celebrating that day. How cruel for them. Days before my release I realized the people overjoyed to see me were there to see the new **[author]**, the changed **[author]**, the one deemed ready to rejoin society.

I embraced the happiness and went to breakfast with the crowd. The restaurant was busy, music played and there was the aroma of coffee, perfumes, and bacon. A dozen phones chirped and buzzed on the table. Everyone spoke at once, all happy.

The waitress had no idea I had been in prison for nineteen years. Everyone ate and a hundred photos were taken. Then it was time to part ways and drive to the parole office. The car moved dangerously fast and I gripped the doorhandle. I recognized the parole office without ever having been there. Filthy and drab. Deserted. I waited until someone came out with a small stack of forms to be filled out. And it was over. I wouldn't even meet my parole agent for another week.

When you're a life prisoner and released, they give you twenty-four hours to see your family before reporting to your transition house. I went home with my wife.

The drive was surreal, like the restaurant had been. All the plastic bubble cars zipped down the freeway. The grasses and the trees. The cows and the horses. Drove past towns where I had built houses in a former life. Saw the changes and how some things stayed the same.

And then we were home. Lawn. Carpet. Immediately went barefoot. Strode on the wet grass and carpet. I could feel the wood floor spring slightly under my feet. I walked. There were birds everywhere outside. I had been given a phone which wouldn't stop ringing but I didn't know how to answer it. My clothes felt funny. My pockets were heavy with new things – wallet, pieces of paper, loose change, candy, masks, bandana, and the strange magic phone.

The phone. I couldn't answer it all day until someone showed me to press the green phone icon and swipe up a bit at the same time. My last phone was a simple Motorola flip phone. Now I had the entire world at my fingertips if I could only use it.

I woke in the morning refreshed. My first morning to not waking up in prison. My wife drove me to the office of the transition house where I would stay for the next six months. It was a few blocks from the actual house. Everyone was friendly and I filled out paperwork for about an hour. Then there was an interview where everything concerning the program was explained to me. I mostly nodded in agreement to things I knew I would understand later and when asked I told my life story to a counselor. That part I had done many times in prison in order to get out, whether in self-help groups or in front of visitors to the prison such as airmen from Travis airbase. I held nothing back.

I had previously chosen a transition house but it was suddenly closed due to a covid outbreak so the state sent me here. It exceeded any expectations I had while imprisoned.

The transition house is a typical three-bedroom home in suburban Fairfield. I am in a bedroom with two dressers and a bunkbed. Large kitchen, dining room with seating for six, family room with cushy sofas and leather chairs. The floors are carpet and hardwood. Two car garage with washer and dryer and a freezer. Two full baths. It's a fifteen-minute walk to downtown or the mall, a five-minute bike ride.

More food than I ever imagined. Bananas, raspberries, oranges, grapes. Milk, meat, bread, and fish. This is a transition recovery house and they want us to be healthy. We cook for ourselves or each other.

Everyone is assigned a chore or two. And that's it. The house runs itself. The guys here have made their way out of prison and are on the right path. Most of the eight of us work all day in nearby Vallejo building pre-fab houses. Some work for Cal-Trans. You're expected to work, to save, to be on the right path when you leave.

And then there is me. I will work from the house, transcribing Braille.

From the moment I stepped out of prison I have been called, texted, e-mailed, and cared for by both **[redacted for anonymity]** and **[redacted for anonymity]**. Calls showing a ton of concern about me and how I was adapting to my new free environment.

After being found suitable for parole I applied for and was accepted into the West Coast Reentry Initiative. They are willing to help transcribers like myself rejoin society, set them up in business, and ease any concerns a new parolee might have. I have been transcribing Braille full-time in prison for the past thirteen years. It is my chosen career upon release. I appreciate all the assistance offered.

Just a few days after my release my equipment began arriving to me. Equipment purchased through the West Coast Reentry Initiative for me to start-up my transcribing business. Every morning something would be found at the front door – cables, computer tower, monitors, printer. Every day was Christmas at the front door for me. And it was my turn to start e-mailing **[redacted for anonymity]** and **[redacted for anonymity]** telling them of the progress of the arrivals and thanking them.

I should be working by the end of this week – less than a month after being released.

I have used my days to the fullest, reconnecting with people, renewing my driver's license, obtaining ID and bank accounts. All the things needing to be done to rejoin society.

In prison we are taught that we are less than, that we don't count, and are certainly not to be trusted.

One of my biggest surprises has been all the people I have met since my release. I walked into a Starbucks and was overwhelmed as the giant menu on the wall. Clearly, I needed help and explained I had never been in a Starbucks before – they hadn't been invented when I left. When I explained I had been in prison the gal behind the counter welcomed me back to society and gave me a huge chocolate coffee something on the house.

The same at DMV, they were genuinely happy I was back in the world, I left in fifteen minutes with my temporary license. Same story at the bank.

People I pass on the street say hi.

At first, I had anxiety in public – what would this person in front of me think or do if they knew my secret – but if a person does find out all they want to do is help.

I return the favor. Long stop light? No problem. Freeway traffic? I am fine enjoying the scenery around me. I am the happiest guy in town. Need help carrying or moving something? I'm your guy. I just admire the colors.

I cannot say enough about **[redacted for anonymity]**, **[redacted for anonymity]**, and the West Coast Initiative. How they have gone out of their way in welcoming me back and set me up for success. I will be another example of how this program works. Their assistance will aid me in helping others. I look forward to attending conventions and networking with everyone. I will continue this relationship for many years. Maybe I'll be the next one to help when someone else is released.