

Second Shot

a film by Andrew Michael Ellis

Community Discussion Guide

ODYSSEYIMPACT!

TRANSFORMFILMS

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Ray V. Boyd

Returning Citizen/Juvenile Lifer
Author/Speaker/Activist/Publisher

What Should Justice Look Like?

This reflection is a testament to my personal quest to change, and my goal – to one day be free so that I may advocate for the lives of those who struggle against social injustices. Understanding the concept of responsibility, I must take into account that a family has experienced pain and suffering for an act I committed as a young adult. However, a question lingers: **At what point does a sentence become more destructive than constructive?**

With all sincerity for my victim’s family, and deep regret for the harm I caused, this reflection is an exploration of the question, What should justice look like? Just 43 days after my 17th birthday, I made a life-altering decision that I have spent the last 11,238 days (30 years, 9 months, and 1 week) living with. On September 21, 1989, I took the life of a young man from my community over drug turf.

I started getting involved in illicit activity at the age of 12, and by the time I was 17, my life had spiraled completely out of control. In just five years I went from an innocent 12-year-old who chose to sell drugs to provide for myself, to a murderous 17-year-old who could care less about my life or the lives of others. And in the fall of 1992, on November 21st, I was sentenced to a 50-year term in the Connecticut Department of Correction. The transition from the “concrete jungle” into a jungle of concrete and steel was not smooth.

My first experience with prison was traumatizing. I knew a life of violence on the streets of New Haven, Connecticut, but upon arriving in confinement, I immediately had to adapt to a concentration of violence in the predatory prison environment. Imagine entering a space where individuals prone to violence, individuals from not only one city, but many cities, are concentrat-

ed with nowhere to run or hide. Men who once were at each other’s throats in their respective cities, now banded together for survival. Gangs and gang violence ruled, or so I thought. These groups of men governed all that existed within the impenetrable rolls of razor wire stacked on 15 feet of brick-and-mortar walls. I was left with two choices: become a predator or become their prey. I now attribute my association with the former to my lack of education; I was a seventh-grade dropout reading at a 3rd-to-4th grade level. My choices were driven by hypervigilance and an instinctive nature to survive.

Very early on in my sentence, I became associated with a gang (Elm City Boys/ECB) and gang violence. The gang was founded by a group of men from New Haven, The Elm City, and because of my reputation on the streets of New Haven, I was sought to become a member of this prison gang. Truthfully speaking, association breeds similarity. I would have been known as a member of ECB whether I liked it or not because I had met most of these men while living a life of crime. Gang culture is a very strange one and members are sold on the idea of being a family. This is the reason that gang members refer to each other as their “Brothers.” A lot of men, like myself, are quick to join these gangs in part because we

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feel we have never experienced a sense of family on the outside. In joining a gang, I found myself going from one dysfunctional family – my biological family, into another extremely dysfunctional “prison family.” I inherited all their issues: pain, trauma, depression, and stress, along with their maladaptive behaviors that led to various violent interactions with staff and other inmates. Three years into my membership – into what I was sold on as being a brotherhood, a family – I found myself arrested on a gang assault charge for an attack on another gang member. This assault landed me in the Department of Correction Close Custody Phase Program.

The Close Custody Phase Program was a blessing and a curse. I realized who I did not want to be – someone else’s tool, but it strained my capacity to stay sane. However, it afforded me the time needed to introspect and focus on the direction I needed to take my life. The Close Custody Phase Program was the first in the nation to deal with the issue of gangs and handling gang violence in our country. This meant that during my time in the program, I became a part of a Department of Corrections experiment. I found myself feeling like a lab rat! I was sickened by the weekly perp walks wherein myself, and others similarly situated, would be paraded in front of visiting Correction De-

partments from throughout the country. The shame I felt did not sit well with me. I said to myself, “I am a married man, a father to a son born six months into my incarceration, I am a son, a brother, an uncle, and a friend.” Not only do I owe better to myself, but I also owe it to those who I love and to those that love and support me in return. One morning, I sat at the small desk in the cell reading. (I was not permitted to lay in the bed in this program). I was transfixed by Jack Henry Abbott’s poem, “The Box,” from *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*. When he wrote it, Abbott was a 37-year-old

man who had lived 25 years behind bars. Abbott’s poem gave words to my isolation, my experience of being taken away from everyone and everything. Just thinking of his words now gives me chills. Those very words became lifesaving. At that very moment, I vowed to do something of value with my life. Something that I and others could look back on and be proud of.

First, I became committed to restoring my family name; second, I focused on leaving a legacy for those who knew me. If I were to never make it out of prison, I wanted people to look back at my life and see I strived to not only do good, but to be considered a better person. I sincerely took part in the programming that the

Department of Corrections had to offer me at the time. Moreover, I went on to acquire my GED while in prison. I also knew that I had to do away with all “street” vernacular because it would hinder me from effectively conveying my message of change. These were no easy tasks, however, I tackled these obstacles under the strain of a 23-hour lockdown and extreme isolation.

On July 16, 1996, I completed the Close Custody Phase Program. I was transferred into the general population at Cheshire Correctional Institute (CCI. I began to use what I learned through that experience in the “gang unit”

to become an advocate for social injustices taking place in prisons across America. I spent the next two decades mentoring men – young and old, who listened to what I had to offer. I know that most would say that it is impossible for a man to be vulnerable in prison; however, coming face-to-face with myself, engaging myself sincerely and honestly, tackling my shortcomings, and sharing what I learned with my loved ones, revealed to me the power of vulnerability. I have consistently and diligently worked to provide a space for young men behind the walls to experience this power.



MY DEDICATION TO COMMUNITY, BOTH IN PRISON AND BEYOND PRISON WALLS, LED TO ME BECOMING A WRITER AND AN ADVOCATE FOR SOCIAL INJUSTICES HERE AT HOME IN NEW HAVEN, AND THROUGHOUT THE NATION.”

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When I went back into the general population, I felt as though I had to be vulnerable in order to be able to speak to the many adversities I faced in my life, and how I overcame them. It was important that others could learn from my personal experiences. I wanted to convey as much as I could to as many men as I could, because I knew that these men did not have a life sentence as I had. Therefore, I worked hard not to hold back on them. I committed myself to helping them return to the com-

munity, not only as viable citizens, but prepared for the challenges they were sure to face.

On November 15, 2021, I was released from prison and given my own opportunity to be a viable citizen. My dedication to community, both in prison and beyond prison walls, led to me becoming a writer and an advocate for social injustices here at home in New Haven, and throughout the nation. I am here today to advocate for what justice should look like.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ray V. Boyd was released from the Connecticut Department of Correction on November 15, 2021, after serving twenty-nine and a half years of a fifty-year term for a crime that was committed when he was just seventeen years old. During his incarceration, in 2015, he Co-Founded the Skills of Socialization (S.O.S.) program at the Osborn Correctional Institute and in 2018 he Co-Founded the T.R.U.E. Reentry program at the Cheshire Correctional Institute, where the program was aired on 60 Minutes news magazine.

Since his release from incarceration, he has worked at Lewis Real Estate while attending real estate school. He volunteers his time to abolish the American Prison Industry Complex and solitary confinement with CT. Stop Solitary Confinement while advocating for second chance offenders. He is the Author of *The Model Inmate* which explores his time of incarceration.

He looks to share his lived experience with all so that it may benefit the lives of others.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 01 When viewing *Second Shot*, what went through your mind when Mr. Bartley stated that at times he didn't think he deserved to be released from prison?
- 02 Despite all that Mr. Bartley did to change his life, the parole board did not want to set him free. At what point does a term of incarceration become more destructive than constructive?
- 03 At a young age Mr. Bartley was a survivor of gun violence, causing him to carry a gun as a strategy for avoiding further victimization. What types of support can be given to victims of gun violence that could open other avenues for survival?



Catherine Jones

Co-Director of Outreach &
Partnership Development at
Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth

What Is Justice?

As I watched *Second Shot* for the second time, tears filled my eyes as I asked myself for the millionth time, “What is justice?”. When a child takes the life of another human being, what does justice look like? On one side, you have a life taken too soon – a void in the lives of their surviving loved ones that can never be filled – a pain that no balm can heal. On the other side, a child is thrown into a system designed to strip them of their humanity, slowly erode their spirit, and extinguish their hope. **In this current system, neither side wins.** Neither receives “justice.”

At the ages of 12 and 13, my brother and I took the life of another human being. I understood, personally, Lawrence’s statement in *Second Shot* when he described the conflicting emotions of wanting to “get out” and at the same time “wondering if [he] should ever be released.” I understand feeling like prison was my just punishment, while at the same time desiring to be free from the torment of that barbed wire cage burning in my heart. How can I reconcile the fact that I had to be held accountable, with the knowledge that no child deserves to be subjected to the cruel and inhumane treatment they receive in adult prison?

When I was charged as an adult for homicide at the age of 13, I ceased to be a child in the eyes of the law. Somehow, my crime negated my need for protection, affection, love, and respect. I was no longer Catherine. I became inmate #E10086. Hugs became an offense that put you in solitary confinement for 30 days. I was no longer called by my name. My already traumatized psyche now had the added trauma of taking someone else’s life. There was no mental health support available, except a psychiatrist that overprescribed me psychotropic medications that left me with glazed eyes and a numb mind.

Was this justice?

Seven years after my release, I went before a different judge on behalf of my brother and co-defendant, seeking to get his life probation terminated. The state’s attorney sought out the surviving family members to get their support in keeping him on supervision. I’ll never forget the anger and anguish in their voices as they vehemently opposed a reduction in our sentences. My heart broke as I realized that they hadn’t been given any meaningful resources that would help them heal or deal with their loss. Instead, their pain was being used like a chess piece by the state’s attorney to win her case. Was this justice?

None of us are who we were as teenagers. We’ve grown and matured with age. We wouldn’t make the same decisions with our adult logic that we did as children. Scientific research suggests that our brains aren’t fully developed until we’re in our mid-to-late twenties. This is why we don’t allow our 15-year-olds to drive, our 18-year-olds to drink, or our 17-year-olds to vote. As a society, we don’t view minors as capable of accepting these responsibilities. Yet, we hold children to the same level of accountability as adults in a courtroom. Is this justice?

What Is Justice?

According to research conducted by The Sentencing Project¹, 80% of people serving life sentences for crimes committed as children reported witnessing violence in their homes; 80% of girls and nearly half of all children sentenced to life in prison reported experiencing physical abuse; and 79.5% of girls and 20% of all juvenile lifers reported being victims of sexual abuse. Because of the difference in their brains, the impact of childhood trauma, and the Supreme Court rulings based on those facts, children who commit crimes should be held accountable in age-appropriate ways that focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society. To do anything less is not justice. It's a violation of a child's human right to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter the crime they committed.

I was among these statistics. I was sexually abused by my uncle from the age of five up until my arrest at 13. My mother left me and my brother with our father to escape his physical and emotional abuse, leaving us to become the objects of his wrath. I suffered in silence until two months before my arrest when I finally told the authorities what was happening to me, only to be threatened by my father

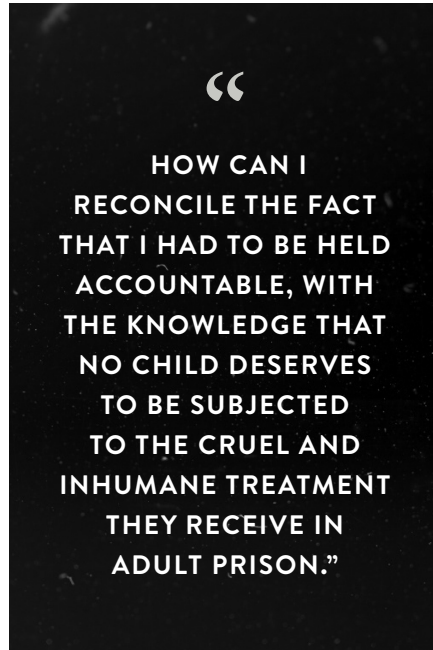
to recant my story. When my brother finally told me that he too was being sexually abused by my uncle, I came up with what seemed to be the only plan to escape the hell in which we lived.

My plan was to kill everyone in my house and run away. This was a decision bred from the heart of a hopeless, little girl dying to be free. I wasn't a monster. I wasn't a predator. I was the fox that chewed off her own foot to escape the trap. I was desperate. My 13-year-old mind devised a plan that cost someone their life while simultaneously destroying my own. At least I thought it did at the time.

I've since traveled the long, hard road to redemption. I've found healing in my faith and in my advocacy on behalf of people like me. As a 37-year-old mother of two, I have wished many days I could go back to that 13-year-old me and tell her there were other

options, because at 13, I saw none. I've prayed that God heals the hearts of those who lost their loved one because of my actions.

And, as I view my story through the lens of both a victim and the one who committed harm against others, I continue to ask myself, "What is justice?"



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Jones joined the CFSY team in 2020 and serves as the Co-Director of Outreach & Partnership Development. In this role, she holds leadership positions in both the Movement Building and Strategic Partnerships departments, responsible for helping bridge these areas of work. Catherine develops and implements a range of projects and initiatives, aimed at ensuring those returning from prison have meaningful opportunities to prosper and thrive. Catherine also conceived and oversees Heart to Heart, a program for female-identified ICAN members to create and experience mentorship and peer support. Catherine is a seasoned and sought out public speaker and content expert on criminal justice reform. She presents nationally to diverse audiences, and her story and expertise has been highlighted in numerous articles, podcasts and documentaries... Catherine, herself, is a formerly incarcerated youth and proud ICAN member. Incarcerated at the age of 13 for murder, she was released in 2015 at the age of 30. Her experiences as a child within the penal system sparked her passion to be a voice for those she left behind and for the ones who will come after her. When not wearing her advocacy cape, Catherine relishes her role as Mommy to her two beautiful children.

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¹ Sentencing Project, U.S. The Sentencing Project. United States, 2002.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 01 Science suggests that human brains aren't fully developed until our mid-to-late twenties and that youth have a unique capacity for change. Why do you think our country's laws haven't aligned with the scientific evidence?
- 02 How did this documentary change your views on the American criminal justice system?
- 03 What would you have considered as justice in Lawrence's case? My case?





Rabbi Lydia Medwin

Associate Rabbi

The Temple

Reflections On Judaism and Forgiveness

If one were able to compile all of the Jewish sources written over the course of millennia and hit search on the word “forgiveness,” one would find literally thousands of hits. And with each of these hits, one could find a context that differs from the others, layering meaning upon meaning, nuance upon nuance. And yet, one does find an overarching theme: **our God is a forgiving God.** And we must do our best to emulate God.

What we see reflected in the documentary *Second Shot*, though, is the real struggle over forgiveness and the real wrestling with the purpose of prison. Instead of creating a path toward true forgiveness and restoration, our criminal legal system today sets up conditions in which prisons are used solely for punishment and retribution. To be clear, this does not account for the one who was harmed by the crime and their notion of retribution or punishment. As *Second Shot* explains, punishment rests solely in the hands of the state. As humans, we all make mistakes. Those who make big mistakes should face consequences and should understand the weight of their mistakes. But when people take the wrong path, should they be allowed an opportunity to learn from mistakes and have a chance to earn forgiveness?

To say that the Israelites make some mistakes in the stories of the Bible is an understatement. Many times, people anger God, feel distant from their Creator, and rupture that sacred connection. We read about many times, too, when people act terribly toward one another, inciting violence and further destruction. But after all of these exiles from the Divine and from one another, we always see a reconciliation, a road back to healing, and a model for forgiveness.

The most famous of these reconciliations follows

the most egregious sin in early Israelite history just after the Israelites redemption from slavery (Exodus 32). Newly autonomous and inexperienced with the ways of their new God, they built a golden idol to worship and reverted to familiar tropes. When Moses returns from forty days on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, he and God both are furious. Moses smashes the tablets, and God threatens to destroy the entire people and start over with Moses himself. Moses manages to calm the situation, remind God of God’s highest self, and they begin the process of rebuilding and healing. In one of the most intimate and exquisite moments of Torah, Moses asks to see God’s very face, expressing a desire to know that he is fully forgiven and a sense that their healed relationship is closer than ever before. And while God cannot show God’s face, God does pass by, protecting Moses from the full might of God’s presence, and utters a name that we continue to repeat on our Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur each year: God, God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. In short, God’s very name, uttered at this most vulnerable and tender moment, is literally forgiveness.

Jewish tradition and its understanding of sin differs

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significantly from the Christian notion of “original sin.” In Judaism, humans are not born sinful. Instead, each person is born with a pure soul and has the capacity for good and evil. These inclinations, the *yeter hatov* (good inclination) and the *yetzer harah* (the baser inclination) are constantly pulling us towards one way or another. Our work is to channel our efforts as often as possible toward the good. But there’s an understanding that that is not always possible. The word in Hebrew for sin (*het*) literally means something that goes astray, like an arrow that misses the mark. When an archer misses the target, it is not a permanent failure. Rather, an archer can keep trying to get arrows closer to the target and ultimately to its center. Like the Israelites alone in the desert, there is no guarantee of immediate success, nor does success ensure that the goal will be reached in all subsequent attempts. We mess up, we go astray, and we miss the mark.

When that happens, the process of asking and giving forgiveness, or repentance, becomes paramount. It is the process that enables healing, growth, learning, hope, repair, and a way to keep moving forward. Without forgiveness, our tradition understands that there can be no way forward. That said, our great teacher, the Rambam (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, circa 1100 CE, from Spain then Egypt) teaches that a part of moving forward is taking responsibility for the harm caused, feeling genuine remorse, and, when encountering a similar situation in the future, making a different choice that affirms life and goodness (Deuteronomy 30:19). This is the path toward true forgiveness and repair. Our character is shaped by the ways we respond to our failures rather than by our failures themselves.

Jewish tradition teaches that while prayer can help atone for forgiveness from God, prayer alone does not work to repair brokenness between two people. For this,

the harmed one must also be ready to forgive. This may feel impossible depending on the type of harm done, as we saw with Chad Hall in *Second Shot*.

There is a story told by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel about a rabbi traveling on a train. Wishing for a quiet ride, he dressed in peasant clothes. Appearing as a poor man, he was harassed by the other men on the train, kicked and punched, and cursed throughout the trip. When the rabbi disembarked from the train, throngs of people awaited his arrival, as he was very well-known and revered in the region. The men who tormented him

returned to him, apologizing profusely and begging forgiveness. The rabbi looked sadly at the men and said, “I wish I could, but I cannot. You are asking me to forgive you, but you are mistaken – you must ask that man on the train.”

Perhaps forgiveness is truly impossible. If the one who is harmed is dead or beyond healing, there may be no way to fully forgive. Still, as Rabbi David Evan Markus urges us, “forgiveness isn’t absolute. We can ‘forgive’ even if we feel someone doesn’t deserve it—because we ourselves deserve the peace that can come by releasing pain and grudges.”¹ That can be a form of forgiveness, as the brother of the one who

was harmed finally came to understand in the movie. It doesn’t excuse wrongdoing or deny the need for restitution, but from a religious perspective, it does allow us to live with a measure of healing even as full forgiveness may remain unavailable.

When forgiveness is possible, we typically speak of three different kinds: *mechilah* (forgiveness of indebtedness), *selichah* (achieving empathy or understanding), and *kaparah* (purification, only offered by the Divine). *Mechilah* is the most transactional form of forgiveness, occurring when the one who is harmed no longer feels owed something. It is the case where justice has been



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Rabbi David Evan Markus

Reflections On Judaism and Forgiveness

served, whether achieved through a simple apology or fine, through punishment, or through repentance and a genuine sense of remorse. The score is settled, so to speak. *Selichah* is an act of the heart. With this form of forgiveness, the one who has incurred harm sees the one who caused harm in the fullness of their humanity. Finally, *kaparah* is a full and complete cleansing of sin from the heavenly courts, outside of human control, but, we hope, influenced by our heartfelt prayers and petitions. These differing definitions of forgiveness give us a wider scope for understanding the nuances within forgiveness and perhaps access to one level of forgiveness even if other, higher levels are yet unavailable to us.

While forgiveness is not required to be offered by the one harmed, there are limits on how far the one who has done harm must go to ask for forgiveness. The Rambam again has advice here and says that a sinner must take responsibility, sincerely reflect, repent, and change their ways. Once he does these things, he must ask for forgiveness from the harmed individual up to three separate times, with integrity and an honest effort at reconnecting. If the one who has been harmed is still unwilling to offer forgiveness after that third time, the sinner is no longer liable to ask for forgiveness. They must continue to behave in ways that conform with their previous commitments, but they are no longer held accountable in the same way to that person. While centering justice and

ensuring the sinner no longer follows his wicked ways, Judaism is practical in its mercy, offering paths toward repair, even if it's not reciprocal. This is the storyline in *Second Shot* that rings so beautifully true. Both Lawrence Bartley, the person who perpetrated the crime, and Chad Hall, the victim's brother, were held in confinement in different ways, and both were set free when a path towards forgiveness and mercy were opened for them.

On the Jewish New Year of Rosh HaShanah, tradition has it that God writes our names into one of two books; the *rasha gamur*, entirely evil person, goes into one for judgment, and the *tzadik gamur*, entirely righteous one, goes into the other for blessing. But, as Rabbi Fred Dobb reminds us, most of us are somewhere in the middle—"maybe perched right on the fulcrum, where our next altruistic or selfish act could tip the entire personal and cosmic scale."² Until the books are sealed on Yom Kippur ten days later, we have the opportunity to repent, ask forgiveness, give forgiveness, and get written into the Book of Life. In doing so, we practice during that time what we hope to continue into the rest of the year. When we are judging others, when we harden our hearts against forgiveness or the possibility of repair, it can be helpful to remember both the humanity of the offender and our own very human shortcomings and mistakes. Perhaps the next decision we make will tip the scales one way or another for the entire world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rabbi Lydia Medwin joined the clergy team at The Temple in 2014 and currently serves as Associate Rabbi. A native of Memphis, Tennessee, Lydia attended the University of Texas in Austin (hook 'em) and Hebrew University for undergraduate studies, earning degrees in Middle Eastern Studies and Honors Humanities. She was ordained on the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College in May of 2010. Rabbi Medwin is a certified Jewish Meditation Teacher. She is a co-author with Dr. Ron Wolfson and Rabbi Nicole Auerbach of *The Relational Judaism Handbook: How to Create a Relational Engagement Campaign to Build and Deepen Relationships in Your Community* (Kripke Institute). Lydia also proudly serves as a co-founder and co-chair of the board for the Multifaith Initiative to End Mass Incarceration.

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² Dobb, Fred Scherlinder. "Reconstructionist." Ask the Rabbis: Are There Things That Can't Be Forgiven? September/October 2019, <https://momentmag.com/ask-the-rabbis-are-there-things-that-cant-be-forgiven/>. Accessed December 2, 2022

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 01 In your faith tradition, are there actions for which there can be no forgiveness?
- 02 How do we know when justice has been served and when it is time for forgiveness? What does your faith say about justice and about forgiveness?
- 03 What does forgiveness offer the one who is harmed? The person who perpetrated the harm? The community at large? What does your faith tradition teach about healing the harm people do to one another?

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Billy Taing
Co-Director
API Rise

Personal Reflection

Second Shot takes me back to my own journey. I can relate to Lawrence Bartley's experience of feeling lonely and sad, locked away from my loved ones, but also feeling guilt and shame for the terrible crimes committed. And I empathize with where Chad Hall is coming from. Justice will never be served for someone who loses a loved one. I can never undo the harm I caused to all my victims, their families, and the community. I was incarcerated for 21 years and throughout those years I grew, learned, and transformed. **Today, I strive to be the best person that I can be right now.** My name is Billy Taing.

Two months after I turned 19, I made a very terrible decision that forever changed my life. On September 10, 1994, I robbed a tour bus on its way to Las Vegas. At the time, I rationalized that these people were gambling away their money anyway. In my distorted way of thinking, it was okay to take their money. I figured that no one was going to be harmed. In my role, I was going to make sure the robbery went smoothly. I had a gun and pointed it at the tour guide, forcing her to translate to the tourists that this was a robbery and no one would get hurt if they gave us their money. Although I didn't physically hurt anyone by my callous actions, I mentally and emotionally traumatized those people for the rest of their lives. I took away their sense of security and instilled fear in them for the rest of their lives.

I committed the crime because I was an insecure, selfish, thoughtless, weak, and scared kid. My family and I were refugee immigrants to the United States. I was born in Cambodia to Chinese parents. My father was a Chinese professor. When I was one-and-a-half years old, Khmer Rouge soldiers barged into our home and accused my father of plotting against their regime. He was beaten in

front of our family and dragged away. We never saw him again. Our family was placed in a labor camp for the next three-and-a-half years. During those years, I was often left in the care of strangers while they made my mom work in the rice fields. My older brother was sent to a child labor camp. He was only five-and-a-half years old then. I often experienced hunger, neglect, abuse, and extreme illness, and I almost lost my life at one point. My mother often tells people that it's a miracle I survived.

When we immigrated to the United States, we did not know anyone. Most of my mom's family members were either killed by the Khmer Rouge or lost. My mom later found out that her parents, her older sister, and my father's parents were killed. America was a new start for us. But as a single mother in a new land, ill-equipped to communicate because she did not speak or understand English, my mother often struggled to make ends meet. She later remarried, but life was still challenging for her in America. She never tried to learn English because she constantly worked to provide for us.

We moved constantly during our first three years in the United States. We arrived in Atlanta, Georgia, then

Personal Reflection

moved to San Diego, California, before settling in Los Angeles. We didn't really settle down until I was nine years old. While growing up, I often looked up to my older brother. He was four years older than me. As he got older, he started getting into trouble. At 14, he ran away and became involved with gangs. As I reflect on his life experience, I can't imagine the trauma he experienced from witnessing our father getting beaten and dragged away, to surviving a child labor camp and trying to adjust to a foreign land. I often heard stories of how he witnessed the most brutal situations as a young child. I can only imagine how those traumatizing experiences led to his poor choices and drug abuse.

When my brother left, I felt very alone and invisible at home. In our house, I was expected to be a good and obedient kid. Most of the time I kept quiet and did as I was told. The only comfort I had was hanging out with friends. Most of the kids I grew up with were also refugee immigrants who fled war-torn countries. When I got to high school, some of those friends became gang members, and naturally, I also felt that I belonged with those crowds. I felt embraced and like I belonged. I felt I was heard and they accepted me for who I was. At the time, I thought that I was getting the love from them that my family didn't give me. I was terribly wrong. I realize now that my mother loved me more than anything in the world. Her way of expressing that love was through doing everything in her power to make sure that I have a better life than she did.

A month before I committed my crime, a plan was initiated by a fellow gang member. That plan was to rob a tour bus. I readily volunteered. I wanted my peers to know that I was down to do anything for our hood and to "show how it's done." In reality, I was just an insecure and scared little kid who wanted others to think that he was not afraid. I was willing to do whatever it took to not only secure my place in the gang, but also elevate my

status because I thought that gaining power would make me feel less weak. I was a coward hiding behind the gang. Those distorted views led me to be a callous person capable of committing a crime that would forever impact the lives of all the people on the bus that day. As a result of my selfish action, the ripple effect impacted my family, relatives, and community, along with everyone else paying taxes to keep me incarcerated for 21 years.

My trial took 18 months while I was detained at Los Angeles County's Men's Central Jail. At an age when many kids are going off to college, I was learning about survival in an LA County jail. I learned how to make my

first shank. Surviving LA County Jail was a harsh reality in itself, and then I eventually went to trial and lost. My family couldn't afford to hire a lawyer, so I had to use a public defender. I was sentenced to two life sentences plus 14 years and eight months to be served consecutively. The judge said he could sentence me to die in prison, but instead showed me and my co-defendants mercy. In 1996, there was a no parole policy in the California prison system. I thought at the time that a death sentence would have been more merciful.

At the age of 20, I was sent to a level 4 maximum-security prison. California had just finished building several maximum-security prisons, and I was sent to Salinas Valley State Prison. I remember the sound of doom when the metal door to my brand-new cell clanked behind me. I thought to myself then, "What will I do with all this time?" With two life sentences plus 14 years to be served consecutively, I thought, "I ain't ever getting out." The thought of ending it all did cross my mind, but that would break my mother's heart even more. During my time in the county jail, I realized that my mom did love me. It's just that, in our culture, it wasn't expressed through hugs and kisses. My mom would take the bus and visit me almost every weekend. I had to lie to her about us being in lockdown sometimes because I didn't



BY LEARNING ABOUT MYSELF AND UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSE OF MY POOR CHOICES AND DECISIONS, I CONTINUED TO WORK ON MY TRANSFORMATION."

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want to see her cry anymore. Over the years, my mom visited me as often as she could. She would befriend another prisoner's family who lived near her and would offer to pay for the gas just so they would give her a ride to see me.

Because I chose to live, I knew that I would have to learn how to survive in prison. Not showing fear and running with other Asians was the best way. The California prison system automatically segregates inmates the moment they step foot inside. Because there weren't too many Asians, we were categorized as "others." We didn't matter because our numbers were small, but we made it a point to matter by refusing to be pushed around and bullied by other races. That's just survival. You can't appear weak because you'll be preyed upon.

During my prison time, I earned my Associate in Arts (AA) degree and took the opportunity to enroll in various rehabilitation programs, including self-help courses. The one program that impacted me the most was a Victims Impact Course. In that course, I learned the consequences of my actions. I gained insight into the ripple effect of

my crime and the harm it inflicted on all the people on the tour bus that I robbed, as well as, my family, friends, and the community. I gained insight into what led me to commit my crime through meditation practices. By learning about myself and understanding the root cause of my poor choices and decisions, I continued to work on my transformation.

I was released after 21 years of incarceration, following my first parole board hearing. On the day I was supposed to be released and reunited with my family, I was handed over to Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) as I am not a citizen of the United States. I didn't know how crucial it was to be a citizen. I just automatically assumed that I was a part of America since I lived here. I was detained by ICE for a total of ten months while facing deportation. Fortunately for me, I succeeded in overturning my deportation order. I was granted a pardon by Governor Jerry Brown right before he termed out. With that, I'm able to stay with my family, continue to care for my aging mother, and have a chance to redeem myself by serving my community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Billy Taing serves as Co-director of API RISE and also co-founder of the Black and API Solidarity Group. His background as an immigrant refugee, former lifer, and activist in the re-entry movement have prepared him to make a deep commitment to the proposition of belonging, forgiveness, and compassion. The core of Taing's dedication to serve is his belief that all persons deserve a chance to live with dignity, and to accept humility as a way to move past suffering.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 01 Lawrence Bartley was sentenced to 27 years-to-life with the possibility of parole for a crime he committed at the age of 17. Lawrence served 28 years. Was justice served?
- 02 If Chad Hall decides to meet with Lawrence Bartley in person one day, how could their conversation be a step toward justice? What would you want them to discuss?
- 03 Research suggests that the human brain doesn't fully develop until around the age of 25. How does this scientific insight impact your views on charging a juvenile as an adult? Is it just?

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Second Shot

Community Discussion Guide

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