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## Finding Freedom in Prison

2 Great Stories

## Calling Things That Are Not As If They Were

## The Answers & Freedom That You Seek

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# Saved by My Fall From Grace

By Melvin Morse, MD

*"A Life is not an error, even when it is."*

*Christian Wiman*

Background: Melvin L. Morse, a medical doctor with a special interest in near death experiences, appeared on many talk shows and television programs. Morse is the author of several books on the near-death experience, in which he offers conclusions based on interviewing children who came close to dying.

His 1991 book *CLOSER TO THE LIGHT* was a bestseller. Oprah Winfrey interviewed Morse about this book in 1992. Larry King interviewed Morse in 2010. The PBS show *Upon Reflection* produced a half-hour episode devoted to Morse. He was the subject of an article in the *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2004 entitled "In search of the Dead Zone".

There is a good chance that you know Dr. Melvin Morse as the "waterboarding doctor." That was the notorious nickname given to me by the media in 2012 when I was accused of torturing my stepdaughter to bring about a near death experience. The truth was bad enough. For me, a single flash of anger negated a lifetime of good works. Yet that same act of anger sparked a spiritual journey in which I found grace and redemption among murderers, home invaders, junkies and other violent felons.

After these first outrageous headlines, things did not get better. A leading expert on near death experiences, a popular Pediatrician and winner of several Best Doctor awards, I was convicted of child endangerment. I was sentenced to three years in prison. I fell from a great height.

For my first months in prison, I was bitter and hopeless. I could only think of all I had lost., I was living with 70 other men warehoused in a concrete and steel room, with rows and rows of metal bunk beds.

My first bunkmate was a 350-pound Black Muslim, incarcerated for armed robbery. I nervously told him that I was Jewish. He embraced me, softly whispering, "We all people of da book." When the tier bully stole my precious ink pen, my bunkmate casually flung him against the wall and handed my pen back to me. With a slow easy smile and gentle light in his eyes, he said, "Doc, you gotta be mindful, always be in da moment."

As I sank deeper into despair, a thin sallow skinny young man approached me. I was ashamed when this obvious junkie said to me, "Doc, I gotta do an intervention. You not caring about what you think. But what you think is who you are." He pulled out a tome by

James Allen and read, "As a Man Thinketh" to me. "Pay attention to your every thought and you will wake up to who you really are. Now I no longer crave heroin and I gotta a job as a plumber's helper waiting for me." This was more compelling than my reading that the Buddha himself paid careful attention to his mind stream as the key to his own awakening.

I started to meditate in that cavernous room with the background sounds of screams, fights, and the constant machine gun like staccato of curse words. Then one day, there was total silence. I thought I had achieved a breakthrough in concentration. I opened my eyes, to see my neighbor, a young college student caught up in heroin addiction, lying in a pool of blood. I asked my bunkmate what had happened. His eyes burned with the knowledge of dozens such events. "Doc, he wasn't mindful. To be aware is to be alive.

I was only aware of my own selfishness. My reputation, my career, all the possessions I owned, all that I thought was important.

My friend, a 56-year-old aircraft engineer, killed an elderly lady while driving intoxicated. I asked him how he lived with the guilt of his crime. He replied, "There came a time when I had to pull the barrel of the gun out of my mouth and accept that (the woman's death) was part of my spiritual journey. It's good that you are suffering Doc. Suffering helps you to understand the suffering of others."

From then on as I meditated, I stopped thinking and started listening with my heart. I felt my own anger, my despair, and ultimately my failure to love. Then strangely I felt that anger, the fear and the terror that my stepdaughter felt and the suffering I created.

Soon I started listening to the men I had formerly thought of as sociopaths and antisocial criminals. One man at age 8 rushed home to greet his grandpa, only to see him blow his head off with a shotgun. Another man, a Coast Guard veteran, engaged in a firefight with drug dealers, cut a 12-year-old kid in half with machine gun fire. Again and again I heard stories of shattered childhoods and horrific trauma from men who wanted to change the way they thought but knew only vindictiveness and hate. Harold Andrus at age 32 was a violent sociopath and career criminal. He joined the Aryan Nation and shanked a man with a sharpened bedspring to earn the lightning bolt tattoos on his neck. As I discovered, he was deserted at age 8 by his mother and was left behind with an alcoholic father. He blamed himself for driving his mother away, which led to heroin addiction as "it gave me something that had always been missing from my life."



Harold now uses meditation to change the way he thinks. He says, "By practicing meditation, I am able to process my mixed emotions one at a time and not allow them to be distorted by anger. With this clear approach to my feelings, I process them spiritually. I have learned to forgive myself. I don't ever want to hurt others."

In prison, I learned empathy, experienced grace and found unconditional love. One day, while in isolation I experienced the concrete walls around me at the subatomic level radiating unconditional love and wisdom for all sentient beings and me. We live in a material world that is made of love.

At long last, I learned what the children who had near death experiences had been trying to tell me all along: Life is about the importance of human relationships and learning lessons of love, not materialistic accolades and making money. I learned to admit my mistakes and ask forgiveness. In doing so I learned what Martin Buber meant when he said that man could only approach the divine by becoming fully human.



Jared Diamond describes the difference between traditional tribal societies and modern state societies in his book, **THE WORLD UNTIL YESTERDAY**. He finds much to admire in the traditional way of social practices found in tribal societies.

As I returned to life outside of prison, I realized that I was returning from a tribal, traditional based society – precisely as described by Diamond and returning to relatively impersonal, harsh, uncaring state society. It was and remains a painful adjustment.

The most noticeable aspect of prison society that I missed was the kindness and respect that prisoners used when talking to each other. Even the most basic interactions with my family and friends on the outside initially made me cringe. Inmates typically are very respectful in everyday routines. Minor conflicts are quickly resolved. Inmates truly live the words of Jesus who said in Matthew 5:24 to resolve a conflict with your brother before giving offerings at the Temple. This is in sharp contrast to the many minor slights and annoyances of modern life which are so glaringly unaddressed.

A common greeting among the inmates is "you good?"

This is meant sincerely. If the other person isn't all right, the speaker will often cajole him, saying "talk about it, get that sick stuff out". I have been asking a neighbor "you good?" when I see him. At first he was very puzzled, now I notice he visibly brightens up when I greet him.

The poor, the disadvantaged, and the disabled are seamlessly taken care of in tribal societies such as prisons. No one in prison needs to embarrass themselves with a sign saying "hungry, please help". In prison it was known "he ain't got no peoples, so slip him something". Typically no disabled person in prison has to fear being beaten up or disrespected. The opposite is true; anyone who bullies the weak in prison is typically quickly disciplined by the strong. Not the stereotype seen on TV? I know, I was shocked as well to see the kindness shown to the least fortunate in prison. It is a sad reflection on modern society where the weak are marginalized and treated like animals.

As Diamond points out, much of the respect and courtesy of tribal societies is because when there are breakdowns in social manners, the results are violent and irreversible. Yet regardless of the reasons, the most difficult aspect of adjusting to my release is to suffer the daily indignities and lack of ordinary respect tolerated in everyday life. I often long to return to the civility of prison life.

*Filmmaker David Hinshaw, who will redefine our understanding of criminal behavior, is telling their stories. The film, titled "Redemption Behind Bars" is in production with a projected release date of mid April 2017.*

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*Melvin Morse, physician, near death researcher, author and public speaker is now learning to re-assimilate into society after being released from prison. He is writing a book about his experience with his fellow prisoners called THIRSTY SPONGES. Look for it to be released in 2017. For more information on the film and on his book, contact David Hinshaw at*

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