The Incredible True Story of How Yoda and the Cheshire Cat Helped Me Get Out of Prison

BY JOHN RED CLOUD / CTCF

Imagine a hospital for a second. Depending on your experience with hospitals, your perception can be quite extreme. Maybe hospitals are cesspools of germs and disease; a place full of suffering and death. Another may see a place where people go to heal and get well; a place where the miracle of life unfolds. I encountered this Jekyll and Hyde perception when I began asking people about halfway houses. Mostly, it's the doomsday warnings: "It's a set-up for failure." Or, "They're just making money off you." And my favorite, "It's a bunch of bulls**t." I can't wrap my head around that. If being in the community is a bunch of bulls**t, SIGN ME UP! Believe it or not, some guys prefer prison to community. The opt to waive community and roll the dice at parole. Not me. Some freedom is better than no freedom.

All convicts have stories about how they got here. Equally diverse is what we are doing to get out. This may depend on how much time you got. It also depends on what it means to be "out." My definition is simple: NOT IN PRISON. Anything that is not prison has got to be better than this. Case in point: community corrections, a.k.a. the "halfway house." Why should you put in for the halfway house? Why do anything? That is free will at its best. Remember in "Alice in Wonderland," when she first meets the Cheshire Cat?

> "If no mistake you have made, yet losing you are. A different game you should play."
> –Yoda

She's at a fork in the road and asks him which path she should take. He asks, "Where are you trying to go?" She responds, "I don't know." "Well then," he simply tells her, "it doesn't matter."

In this warped "Wonderland" called prison, you have to figure out where you want to go. One path can lead you to a halfway house or parole. The other path leads you from write-ups, to orange pants, maybe a stay in restricted housing, followed by loss of good time, and straight past your parole eligibility to your mandatory release date. We all know parole is no guarantee, but there is no better way to shoot yourself in the foot than by taking the wrong turn down the path of self-destruction. How many guys do you know who got paroled on their first try? I have talked to more guys than I can remember who said, "Screw community," and did roll the dice with parole only to be "recommenced" to transition through community corrections. Back to square one.

Several months before you are "community eligible," put in some work. Sign up for open labs in Pre-Release for starters. You can create a rough draft of your community referral and have it typed. Find out exactly what the Pre-Release instructors can do to help. Community placement is not a guarantee. You will be evaluated by factors such as: your offense, institutional conduct, C-TAP score, program compliance, and community support. Halfway houses are proven to help bridge the gap between the false realities of prison and the pro-social expectations of responsible citizenship. Everything you do is documented in DOC, whether you are getting write-ups, or earning your GED. No matter how far away you are from community eligibility, now is the time to start building your résumé.

What you perceive the halfway house "to be," will shape how you approach it. It's either a place to get out for a few months and taste freedom before getting regressed, or it's a chance to get back on your feet and use the resources to make a successful transition back into the community. Halfway houses are not for everyone. Maybe you prefer living in a bathroom with another man. To each their own. As long as staying in prison is the game, you can never win. Play a different game. Give community a chance. You're still in prison if you get denied. I made no mistakes in prison. Parole still set me back. I took Yoda's advice. I put in for community. I was accepted to the halfway house. Now I'm waiting for a bed.