

THE BLOG

# Finding Self-Worth in Jail: Getting Out by Going In

© 09/22/2009 05:12 am ET | Updated Nov 17, 2011



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I was recently invited to speak to a group of women about their self-worth — a subject I address in depth in my new book, *What is Your Self-Worth, a Woman's Guide to Validity*. What was unique about this speaking engagement was the fact that the twenty-five women I spoke to are among the more than 2000 currently incarcerated at the Los Angeles County's Women's Detention facility in Lynwood. My relatively small audience was part of a special reentry program that aspires to help them learn new life skills that they'll surely need in order to change their lives — with self-worth being chief among them.

Getting Out by Going in — GOGI, as the program is known, is permitted and endorsed by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and administered by founder and executive director, Coach Mara Leigh Taylor, author of *Women in Prison - Women Finding Freedom*. Coach Taylor teaches women how to GET OUT of old behavior by GOING INSIDE themselves to find a sense of personal responsibility, personal accountability, and personal freedom. The goal is to guide incarcerated women on a new path that ultimately will help them reenter society and stay there - to break the cycle of crime, dysfunctional behavior and repeated offenses that lands 80% them back in the penal system time after time.

It's no secret that society is in desperate need of programs that can help the prison population reintegrate. At the end of 2008, there were more than two million men, women and children behind bars. Our prisons and jails are massively overcrowded and are dangerous places where disease and violence is commonplace, and our country incarcerates more people than any other nation. Unfortunately for citizens in the general population, recidivism among prison/jail inmates is a big problem.

At the time of my visit, more than 2000 women were incarcerated in a jail facility that was designed to hold less than 1500 - a significant percentage of them recurrent offenders. Some of these women have been in and out of the jail and prison system all of their lives. As you can imagine, the culture all its

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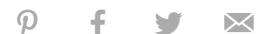
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## Finding Self-Worth in Jail: Getting Out by Going In



prisoners pay their “debt” to society and are tossed back into it. The trouble is, most of them are not any better prepared to live a life without crime in the world outside than they were when they were busted in the first place. Reentering society without first having learned new habits and behaviors, and without establishing a significant support system is even tougher.

The experience of being inside a Detention Center evoked automatic responses at all ranges of my emotional spectrum. Since I’ve never been to a jail before, my preconceptions about jail and prison come from movies and television shows. I wasn’t totally prepared for how I felt about what I saw. My body went on high alert as soon as I entered the building. Fear. Discomfort.

I was not allowed to bring anything into the facility — not my purse, my phone, a bottle of water - nothing but my ID. I couldn’t even carry the notes for my remarks — my host, Coach Taylor, had to carry them. After giving up my ID to a steel-covered drawer, which disappeared into the fortified guard enclosure, I was ushered through the electronically controlled, perpetually locked doors of “the jail.”

The place is bleak and stark. Though the sleeping cell areas are called “dorms,” the simple metal bunk beds stacked three-high are the only pieces of furniture in them, and the absence of personal belongings makes the space look decidedly un-dorm-like. Okay, I know - jail is not supposed to have a summer camp atmosphere — it is meant to be a punishment.

Coach Taylor toured me around the facility where we stayed mostly on the right-hand side of the hallway. Women being processed in, or being moved from one part of the facility to another, are walked single-file on the left-hand side — some with their hands chained behind their back. For me, this was nerve-racking. Though most of the inmates I came into contact with were pleasant and responsive, for the most part I was only seeing women who had won the opportunity to do kitchen detail, or attend a class. The women who were violent, had disobeyed jail rules, or had acted out in an inappropriate way, were detained in a separate area, in solitary-confinement cells.

Many of the women in jail know Coach Taylor. She’s respected and applauded because she represents something nearly mythic; a chance at sustainable change — a glimmer of hope that a ruined life can be rescued and salvaged.

As miracle workers go, Coach Taylor is right up there. The achievements of the GOGI program are extraordinary. Success in the business of counseling inmates in the penal system is measured by rate of recidivism — and since its inception in 2008, the GOGI Campus boasts a 2.5 recidivism rate among its graduates. This is truly groundbreaking, because it means that 97.5 GOGI graduates reenter society successfully and stay there. Based on how difficult it is for women to escape gang life, poverty, addiction, habitual substance abuse, and forced prostitution, this program deserves a huge shout-out.



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Brain, Belly Breathing, and the Five Second Lightswitch, it teaches how to take full responsibility for one's life. And by following the guidelines, GOGI participants learn to be a more positive, loving, good and kind individuals. These are powerful lessons, because for many incarcerated women, words such as positive, love, good, and kind are not the terms they'd ever use to describe themselves.

The women in the GOGI program had been given my book several weeks prior to my visit, and had begun to work through the chapters like students in a classroom. They listened attentively as I spoke to them, and had plenty of questions for me at the end of my remarks. They were sometimes tearful, very curious, and decidedly hopeful. The women loved the positive affirmations in the book, and many told me they used them to start each day. All of the women were trying to grapple with feelings of self-loathing, and a palpable fear that they'd be unable to make the right choices in the future.

Despite the reasons and actions that landed them in the penal system in the first place, these twenty-five women were serious about trying to learn new ways of behaving, thinking, and dealing with their feelings. They were all anxious to learn how to feel good about themselves again — to rediscover their self-worth, and to experience a happier, more fulfilling life, by taking personal responsibility, and personal accountability.

The path to learning how to rediscover, uncover and actualize a sense of self-worth is an especially difficult road for these women, but at least those in the GOGI program are taking it step by step. I was more than happy to be a part of their journey.

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