



The Building Community Institute

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E-Newsletter

"The
Foundation"™

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CHALLENGED

Thank you in advance for accepting my apology for not providing you the April Newsletter. I can only say that I was not ignoring my responsibility, but was overloaded with work. In the last months, my work in the California Prisons has increased. This means that in addition to research, design and development of cognitive restructuring training materials, I have personally been in the prisons. Needless to say, my work among our incarcerated Americans has been a challenge, but none greater than last week (May 4th and 5th) when, for the first time, I found myself behind the walls of the largest female prison in the world. I was unprepared for what I encountered. After going through incredible amounts of security checks, I was finally given permission to go behind the barbed wire walls. I was unsure of what to expect. In the past, my work has taken me to the men's prisons where when walking across the yard, you are confronted with blocks of men, all engaged in some form of exercise and muscle building strategies. This is the picture of the yard carried in my head. However, when the training facilitator and I walked into this yard, my heart sank. Behind those walls were mothers, grandmothers and yes, great-grandmothers. I was blown away at the pulled back gray hair and the stooped over bodies and the slight smiles that could have been smiles from the lady sitting on her front porch.

It was a different level of energy. Yes, there were young women as well. They all mingled together in a world that was cut off from the rest of us. It was hard for me to imagine what crime could have been committed to have brought them to this stage of life. I saw ladies who could have been my great-aunt. I wanted to ask for a bag of 'Tea-Cakes' that only old women with gray hair know how to make. But I quietly spoke and found myself hurting inside for them. Though imprisoned, some of them had looks of comfort and contentment on their faces. It was as if they were home among the flowers they had planted and the friends they had made. This threw me a curve. I later understood that some of them had been incarcerated for more than twenty-five years. Being behind bars had become the only life they knew. I was deeply challenged. With 'Mother's Day' coming up, I could only imagine the heartache running through that prison when no parties of great food and multiple gifts would be shared. All of them were daughters and many of them were mothers.

As I made ready to talk with my assigned group, I wanted to at least remind them of the start of their life's journey. So I borrowed a phrase from a Stevie Wonder song and made it the lead-in to my full-day capacity building presentation. When my first power-point slide appeared, there were multiple pictures of girl babies from all over the world and then the words from Stevie, "Isn't she lovely? Isn't she wonderful?" began to scroll across the pictures of the baby girls. I wanted to remind them that they had a start filled with promise, all wrapped up in their loveliness and wonder. But somewhere along the way, they took a wrong exit. For many of them, the exit taken, redefined their destination. I challenged them to remember who they were and where they were really headed before taking the wrong exit. I wanted them to envision once again who they could have been and determine within themselves to reclaim their rightful places within our society. I challenged them to become "Determined Women." At the end of my day, I signed books for them, for their daughters and some for their mothers. I left the prison with a renewed sense of the value of Building Community and the power of the Eight Habits of the Heart when practiced and lived out on a daily basis. I challenged them and myself to remember that the 'power is in the process.' The 'power is in the process' became our unified chant. I wanted them to know that the 'process' to reclaim their lives could not wait until their release; It had to start then and now. And this is for all of us as well-those outside the barbed-wire walls. The process to build and sustain good communities cannot wait. This is our daily chore.

- Clifton L. Taulbert