

## “Broken”

By Ben Wright

You know that phrase, “Never take anything for granted?” It might sound silly, but I remember the first time I flicked the light switch off...then on again. For three years, the opportunity to do so was taken from me. I spent many nights wide awake because the lights were on, even the emergency lights. Someone had gotten in trouble, was too loud, or perhaps the officer just felt like being cruel. Ever since I got out of prison, I have felt the urge to touch every light switch. Turn them on, then off. It sounds crazy, but the compulsion seemed to develop over time. I just had to switch them on and off again.

I had issues with driving, too. You’d think it would be natural. Kind of like riding a bike. You’d think I could go years without riding and still remember how. Being in prison did not make me stupid... But this loss of control created this level of anxiety in me that I was anxious about driving. The parole office was downtown, and I hated driving downtown. The buildings were too close together. People would swerve out of nowhere. Pedestrians would start walking in front of me. You have to understand, I lost the ability to have any control over myself for three years. So to be in an environment like downtown, where I could control the car but not the stimuli around me—it was scary. It was debilitating. I didn’t expect any of these feelings to emerge. Where did they come from?

The strangest sensations seemed to emerge in me upon my release from prison. I had a hard time explaining it to people at first. Imagine covering your eyes and your ears for an indefinite period of time... While it is obvious that time is still moving because you’re the one covering yourself up... The world around you doesn’t move. In those moments, when you’re

sitting there devoid of anything around you... nothing moves. That's how it felt in there. That's how it felt when I got out. I remember being in my room a few days before the court hearing. My lawyer told me I would probably get probation, but I wanted to have all my bases covered. I remember putting the books in my closet into a box and the boxes next to my bed. I could describe to you the intricate details of what I did that day and the days following. It was like time froze in my head.

I asked my parents when I got out where specific things were. Where was that box of books? What about the pans from the kitchen? All I got from my parents were a bunch of shrugs. Do you see what happened to me? Time froze for me, but it didn't for them. Even though in prison time was moving—day became night and night became day—it was like the real world had paused. I didn't feel any older, wiser, or different. But for my parents, family, and friends, time had continued.

When I was in prison, my parents had to help move my son out of the house. They had to clean the house, then support my son in getting his apartment. When my son abandoned that apartment, they had to move his stuff out. They told me that my son trashed the place—and since his place was on the third floor, they found themselves throwing things over the edge to make it go faster. My step-grandfather passed away and they had to help my grandmother cope with that. They moved, twice. My dog died in their care—my precious dog that was practically my child. He followed me everywhere. I remember my son told me that the dog did not understand where I went. That had to be the hardest for me—it sounds silly, since he was “just” a dog. But the thing is, my parents knew where I was. My son knew how to contact me. My dog? For all he knew, I abandoned him. I had him since he was a puppy, and he was my constant companion. Right by

my side during the happy and the sad. Then all of a sudden, I was gone. My son said that my dog sat on the stairs by my room for months, waiting. How cruel is that?

All these life experiences went on without me. But.. it was like I was in a hamster cage. Just going on the wheel over and over again, day after day. While people were dying, moves were happening, and emotions were all over the place... I couldn't turn on the light switch. It sounds silly, doesn't it? Here they are, dealing with life, while I'm running in circles.

I finally got out—and to my mother, my son, my best friend—time moved, but at a snail's pace. Time moved for me, too—but my mind had tricked itself into thinking that the real world paused. Just for me, it paused. My mind didn't allow itself to process that it missed so much. My mind still won't allow it. I had this weird experience recently—this one person whom I called a friend was all angry around me, all jealous. In my mind, the real world paused—right? So when I was reunited with my best friend, it was like we started right from the point we left off. But this one friend was so jealous of me being around my best friend. To me, it was normal—nothing had changed. To him... As my best friend put it, “You were gone for three years. He had me all to himself. How would you feel?” Numb, that's how I felt.

I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I guess. I am college-educated and have about ten years of work under my belt. My resume was pretty long, with awards and everything. I had three degrees under my belt. I remember thinking during prison, I might not be able to go back into the field I was in but surely my skills will appeal to a good number of employers. I should not struggle to find a job. Once I find a job, I can get a place for myself. I can start saving for retirement, too. I can get back to some semblance of normalcy.

I met so many guys on the inside that had no job experience, no resume to speak of. Many lacked sufficient reading and writing skills. Back then I used to wonder, what about them? What will happen to them? I genuinely did not want to see them go back to prison. You should be able to do your time, be “rehabilitated”, then rejoin society as the citizen you want to be. What kind of citizen you become is on you—but when you cannot even do that, what can you do?

Even though I was pretty broken when I got out—I’m still putting the pieces together (says the guy who flicks the light switch every chance he gets), I was determined to get a job. I even got with the local government agency for those with disabilities. They provide a person to help you get a job. Little did I know at the time, I was a “them”... really, I should have said, what about us?

I applied for hundreds of jobs. There were at least seven times where they contacted me for an interview. Being a transparent person, I told them about my felony straight up. No need to waste my time or theirs. Background checks cost money. Time costs money. All seven times, the HR representative said something to the effect of, “No problem! Come on in for an interview, we are excited to meet you!” I’ll go into the interview and rock it—I know I rocked it, because all seven times I was either offered the position or picked as the final candidate for the job.

Gas station assistant manager. Grants coordinator. Warehouse worker. Overnight, work-from-home scheduling coordinator. Prison mail room worker. These are some of the positions I applied for and got offered the position. In one case, they sent me a computer and webcam and the works. I filled out all the paperwork, the tax documents, everything. Oop! Human resources reviewed your background check... Even though you only have the one felony, even though your work experience is stellar... That one felony takes precedence. I don’t know how many times I was told “you haven’t been out long enough”. I met with the HR Director of one of them, and

asked what I could do to combat that “you haven’t been out long enough” thing. She had said it herself. She goes, “Get a job.” My mind was blown—Isn’t that what I was there for? The other ironic thing is, the agency she worked for was the same exact agency that provided me a case worker to help me find a job in the first place.

What about us? I can’t even get a job working at a gas station. Even the work-from-home one—where I’d be working by myself, overnight—I couldn’t get that one. How can I be the citizen I want to be if I can’t get a job? How can I maintain my finances? How can I find a place to live? I am broken enough... I can’t walk out of a room without flipping the light switch. What about them? What about us?

I’ve been out for a bit now. I was in an interview recently where they asked me, “What should we prioritize? What should we help with first?” I laughed, because it made me think about flipping that light switch. Running in that hamster wheel. Facing that jealous friend. Being told to get a job to prove that I can get a job. Before I was locked up, I talked to my best friend every single day without much fail. When I was locked up, an entire year passed without talking to her. Now we talk every day again. Imagine what that does to your mental health. The constant paranoia of, is it me? Why isn’t she writing? I checked the system every single day for a message. So what can you help with first?

I put all that aside. Sometimes you have to. It is like looking at an empty parcel of land and having a truck full of things... Then the truck dumps everything into a pile on the land and leaves. The sight overwhelms you to the point where you don’t know where to start. What should they help with first? I can’t drive downtown without breaking into a massive sweat. I still can’t fathom that I lost three years. I can’t get a full time job (which means I have zero retirement savings).

When I was in prison, I decided to join the college that contracted with the place. I met this woman who was the Disability Services coordinator. At the time I didn't realize how much of a champion she was... Interpreters were ready for me every class. Being deaf didn't have to be a barrier for me. The prison was in the middle of nowhere—she had to fight every single day to find an interpreter to come to class for me.

What should you help with first? Start small. One step at a time. When that truck dumps that load in front of you... take one piece out, and fight like a warrior for that one piece. That one piece will then pick itself up and start fighting for the other pieces. That's what I'm doing now, isn't it? My fight will be yours, and your fight will be theirs. There is a saying in the disabled community- nothing about us without us. Make it not “what about them” or “what about us”, but “nothing about us without us.”

I love theater—I was involved with a play called *Tribes*. The play was about a deaf man who grew up talking like I did. Later on, he met a girl who knew sign language—which motivated him to start learning. Once he started to learn he realized that it opened a whole new world of communication for him. I portrayed that man, Billy. I won a bunch of awards for it—pretty exciting! I also loved to swim growing up. The proudest moment of my life was during my swimming career. My first year, during the summer league, I was pretty bad. I couldn't even get on the diving blocks, they were too scary. I was determined to get better. I joined a year round team and practiced nearly every day. The following summer, the coach put me in lane one on the first day of practice. Almost immediately, they realized I was too fast for lane one... on that same day, I was in the lane with “the boys”, the fastest swimmers on the team! I was ranked third in breaststroke when it came time for the championships, and I won—it was very exciting!

This determined nature in me has never gone away. In the eighth grade I wanted to be involved in a play called *Alice in Wonderland*. I wanted to be the White Rabbit. Despite my mother trying to soften the blow in case I didn't get the part, I worked hard with my speech therapist to get ready for the role... and I got it!

This is how I want you to see me. The actor, the swimmer, the determined individual fighting for tomorrow. I sit here today with you all, trying to define my path forward. I am broken, but I will persevere. As my favorite singer Dolly Parton says,

*“Oh, sometimes the road is rugged, and it's hard to travel on*

*But holdin' on to each other, we don't have to walk alone*

*When everything is broken, we can mend it if we try*

*We can make a world of difference, if we want to we can fly”* (Parton 2006)

The best path forward, for me, is to work with everyone in picking up those pieces on the ground left by the truck—to close the distance. Together.

## Bibliography

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