

# Meet Dennis.



I'm currently incarcerated for murdering my wife, Jasmine, in our living room. Nothing I write here is intended to justify, condone, or absolve me of accountability for my choice to use violence against Jasmine. It was inexcusable, criminal, and I pleaded guilty because I was guilty. It is my fault. I didn't know what I didn't know – eighteen years ago or even threads that stretch back to the 1970s. I was imprisoned by my thoughts before I came to prison. Besides walking the paths of shame, regret, remorse, and guilt, I engaged in the folly of what I could've done differently to de-escalate a conversation that went from civil to homicide that afternoon. I am going to share with you the processes that would have kept me seated on the couch moments before I attacked Jasmine.

Here is what I've learned in the last eighteen years.

## **Empathy**

That fateful afternoon I distortedly told myself that Jasmine was the enemy, my tormentor. I was the victim. She was an awesome mother, a good wife, and she deserves better. I didn't tell myself the right story. I didn't question if my thoughts were real. I recall the pain of my mother's sudden passing when I was eighteen: the despair, the tailspin, the loss. But I didn't recall that memory as I came off the couch and attacked Jasmine, essentially making my three daughters at daycare orphans. I never disrespected my mother or grandmother; I was on my best behavior around these women. So why not my wife?

## **Toxic Masculinity**

I now understand that I was socialized into a warped ideal of masculinity that was toxic in its origin. Sitting on that couch, I not only denied being in pain, but I wouldn't acknowledge or recognize my primary emotions: hurt, fear, and shame. It was more comforting to let anger bully those feelings and convert them into false pride, power, and confidence.

## **Seeking Help**

I've learned about extreme individualism. I didn't ask for help for my mental health issues because it wasn't a sign of strength or seen as manly.

## **Mindfulness**

A critical component to retaining dignity and composure. By tuning into my bodily sensations, what I'm physically sensing in the present moment, I'm able to be aware of my thoughts without attaching reactive labels to them. I'm aware of aggression and how it plays out in domestic violence. Being grounded by definition cultivates more choices. They include inner dialogues I've learned in AA: "First thought wrong;" "Do the next right thing;" "Will this decision affect the quality of my life?"

## **Domestic Abuse**

I understand that even when violence isn't physical, there are other acts that I used to impose my will on my partners. I didn't know that belittling, betrayal, harassment, coercion, fear, lies, slamming doors, throwing keys, eye rolls, weaponizing the finances, and heavy breathing are all forms of domestic violence. I do now. I've learned that daily life stressors such as bills, unemployment, and medical issues can pressure cook and be catalysts for domestic abuse.

## **Childhood Trauma**

I've learned I wasn't responsible for my upbringing, my own abuse and trauma. Now, as an adult, I'm responsible for my choices. I'm responsible for not seeking a sponsor or mentor to help me reimagine the poor examples of manhood I saw as a child. I was a man-child, needy and dependent. I mentally never left home.

I continually burdened my partners with unrealistic expectations, seeking the parent I never had.

I've learned to hold my own hand.

I've learned about the shame and pain I've carried all my life. I've recycled it and I transfer it to others' dehumanizing feelings. In the past, I never had a problem dehumanizing others. Now, I've learned I can't use my past to justify hurting others. My past shouldn't be another's future.

## **Relationships**

A relationship is not a win-lose zero sum game, as I've always approached them. I've been taught the concept of time-outs: where mindfulness meets intention in an escalating heated situation. I've learned about fair negotiating, effective communication, agreeing on how to disagree. The 48-hour rule where a couple can revisit a disagreement in two days to determine if it is still relevant. I had a family that loved me, the love I always perceived as elusive. My daughters would run outside to greet me when I arrived home. But my mind was shallow and self-absorbed. Now my daughters run from me, eighteen years later. Actions have consequences. In critical moments, it's not just what is occurring. It's how the story is being told about what is occurring. After my self evaluation, I realized I lacked the values of grace, humility, fairness, and gratitude.

## **Adulthood**

I've learned that starting my own family was a privilege, a responsibility, not a right or accessory. I had a family, yet I acted as if I was a bachelor. I now know to pick a lane and stay true to it. An unacknowledged belief system is how I internalized that women were weak and inferior objects. My narrow-minded sexism and sense of entitlement couldn't tolerate Jasmine's standing up for herself. Women existed to tell my fragile ego how great I was. My abusive dysfunction was dangerous. I've learned that there are always alternatives to violence. Real men maintain self-control and meet challenging moments with integrity. That the strategies I used to sustain control with women consistently undermined our trust, intimacy, love, and connection; in other words, an equally satisfying, mature relationship.

## Today

In San Quentin, I facilitate groups on domestic violence and share these lessons with men who will return to their community and relationships, where I'm transparent in sharing my narrative. Everything I do is about amends, to honor Jasmine. Compassion, kindness, advocacy. I can't pay it back, but I can pay it forward. Remorse and guilt aren't silent spectator events. I've never rationalized or blamed anyone for my choices that day. That's like looking in the mirror, seeing a dirty face, and wiping the mirror. San Quentin's culture of transformation has allowed me access to education, resources, literature, workshops, and self-help groups where I gained insight and understanding into how my anti-social beliefs and actions became normalized; to see the unseen foundation of my attitudes to make the unconscious conscious.

I'm responsible for taking my daughters' mother.

For Jasmine not reaching her future, her benefit to society.

I rightfully sit in this cell.

I'm a cautionary tale.

If someone reads this in the community...

before a family is annihilated by patriarchal recklessness

before someone is taken that isn't yours to take

before an act is committed that can't be undone

before the action that ends will never been unseen

before residency is taken up in these cold, lonely institutions

before tears stain the pillows every night

before the life sentence

before the children have to go to the cemetery to visit their parent

...choose responsibility before you leave the couch.