Episode Four: Finding a Way to Express Those Emotions

Herbert: So do you still struggle with keeping Pit Bull at bay?

Theron: Yeah, I do. It's because of what people expect.

Herbert: So are there situations in particular where you're having to navigate that challenge?

Theron: Every day. Every single day, no matter what. I can go to the yard right now, guaranteed, somebody probably have an issue or some type of grievance they're going to try and bring to me.

Theron is leader in his community at the Oregon State Penitentiary. He also has a reputation for violence, which is how he earned the nickname, Pit Bull. As a leader, he's often asked to help resolve conflicts, ones where emotions can run hot. When things start to boil over, Theron's old tendencies toward violence can emerge. He tells me about a time when he was trying to advise a young prisoner, one who was reluctant to change his behavior.

Theron: That's when the aggression almost came out. Like, "Hold on dog. Check this out. Do you know what you're, are you trying to really --this the avenue you want to go to?" But then I had to catch myself. He's just a young dude. He's just a young guy. He don't want to be told what he do. So I got to make a decision. Let him do what he want to do and let the cards fall as they may, or put him in his place.

Herbert: But all that requires you to control your emotions.

Theron: I have to, because in that moment, I got upset. The old me would have probably slapped him right there. But it doesn't solve anything, because now I'm in the hole for something I didn't even care about. For what?

Herbert: So controlling your emotions has been a big part of your transformation?

Theron: It's the cream (laughing) of the crop.

Steve has also seen countless examples of prison aggression.

Steve: That's a classic example of toxic masculinity, I would think. They don't know how to talk it out, I guess.

Herbert: So when you use the term toxic masculinity, what do you mean?

Steve: Just trying to puff your chest out and trying to be somebody, that, you know -- I feel like a lot of people are putting on an act. You know, it's toxic masculinity, because it's, it's not willing to step back and admit any of your faults. Not willing to say, "Okay I did that. My bad."

Herbert: What's the alternative, or what does non-toxic masculinity look like?

Steve: It's just being more open to the other person's side. Being empathetic to what their needs are. You know, if somebody is over there saying, "Hey, man you really hurt my

feelings with that." You say, "Hey, my bad, I didn't know. I'm sorry." That's something a lot of people in here don't know how to do.

If any place can be said to be full of toxic masculinity, it's a men's prison. The culture of prison violence that we explored in our last episode is very much fostered by the masculine norm that allows the open display of pretty much only one emotion – anger. But personal change usually requires us to explore the full range of our emotions. So those who wish to chart a new path in prison must challenge the masculine norm that equates emotional vulnerability with weakness.

This is "Making Amends," I'm Steve Herbert. I used a rare degree of access to the Oregon State Penitentiary to explore how many prisoners reckon with the past and how they search for a way to atone.

In this episode, we will hear stories of prisoners who recognize that their struggle to be a new person requires them to rethink the masculine codes that structure much of prison life. They recognize that they need to become emotionally vulnerable if they want to become emotionally healthy.

Episode Four: Finding a Way to Express Those Emotions

Herbert: So, help me understand why drugs and alcohol were so enticing.

Cameron: Uh, I don't know. I ask myself that a lot and I really don't know. I think it's just because, you know, life is painful sometimes. Just like normal everyday life is painful and awkward and isn't always the greatest feeling. But when you're high, it is. You're always in the greatest feeling.

This is Cameron. We met him in our last episode.

Cameron: So, I think it was a way for me to deal with, just life. And you know, I was a super emotional kid, but boys aren't supposed to be emotional. So I think it was a way for me also to suppress emotion. You know, for a long time, even up into my teenage years, I showed no emotion until I got angry. And then I would be just super angry. But then, like, if I was in a position where I had to talk about my anger, I would just burst into tears. And, you know, getting high was the way to deal with myself and emotion and life and all that.

Cameron's comfort with anger might help explain why he was attracted to a crew when he entered prison.

Cameron: They were what my conception of what manhood was, right? They were tattooed, tough, intelligent. You know, you didn't mess with them. They had respect. You know, that's the kind of stuff I was drawn to.

As he drifted into the lifestyle of his crew, his attachment to the outside world fell away. And his emotional life became more limited.

Cameron: It's painful to think about the people out there. So it's easier to come in here, and this is a very different environment where, we didn't make it violent, we came into a violent place. So in order to succeed in here, you have to become violent. And you have to lower

your empathy and harden yourself and all these other things. So these are survival tools in here, you know.

One morning in class, Cameron and his classmates talked openly about the potential costs of being vulnerable in prison.

Moustafa: Everybody in this place is a badass. Everybody in this place is tough. Everybody in this place is not going to show emotions. Everyone is -- most people are faking it, you know, and everybody gets lost in the crowd. Like, everybody wants to be tough and even if you're at a moment of weakness, so to speak, and you'd like to express something that's on the top of your chest, you don't find a supportive group of people or a safe space for you to do that.

Steve: And I totally agree. But I feel like to explain that further, as probably one of those guys that's facading around. I kind of just keep like a fake face when I walk into chow hall and I see Anthony do it a lot, too. And I understand why, because we've been locked up so long. So I'm like, I'm just going to mean mug everybody for the rest of my life. And if I find somebody that's actually cool, I'll open up. That being said, once I get to know most people in here, I really never met like a monster in here.

Cameron: Well, I think it has to do with being hurt you know. We walk into it with a bunch of people and put on that face saying, "I'm not the one, you know. Don't, don't hurt me cause I'm not the one, you know."

Herbert: You're not the one?

Cameron: Oh, don't mess with me.

Herbert: The one who is vulnerable?

Cameron: Yeah

But Cameron realizes that he must become vulnerable if he wants to travel the path toward atonement.

Herbert: And how much of your own transformation, do you think, has been about learning to understand and modulate your emotions?

Cameron: So that's still, that's something I'm still working on. The only thing that was okay to express in prison, so my whole adult, because I've been here my whole adult life, is anger. So any emotion tends to come out as anger. So trying to regulate that and deconstruct that is something I'm definitely still working on.

Herbert: Can you give me a for instance?

Cameron: So in math class the other day, the professor marked a question on the test wrong that was right, the answer was right there circled just like he wanted me to do it. And I went up to him and talked to him about it and he was real dismissive and just, "I'll

talk to you about it later" right? And I just, anger just surged up in me, and I slammed my hand on the table and when I sat back down. I don't like that feeling, because it feels like I don't have control. And so after I calm down, I just had to think, "Why am I feeling like this?" And, for one, him being dismissive is a real trigger for me. Because for one, I feel like as a child I probably didn't get enough attention. So being dismissed triggers that. And then in prison, I was affiliated and I had status and everything my whole adult life. So people were never dismissive of me. You know, they could love me or hate me, but what they weren't was dismissive. So going into this new cycle of life and these new patterns, I'm still getting used to, like, people are gonna be dismissive of you. You gotta get used to it. And so I think really what I'm working on now is finding a way to express those emotions without reverting to anger.

Cameron is not the only person struggling with his tendencies toward anger and aggression. Terrence needed some time in prison before he fully understood the role his emotions played in his crime, and how he needed to regulate them moving forward.

Terrence: I took a NVC class, which stands for nonviolent communication. That class allows you to be able to be aware of your emotions. Help you to articulate your emotions in a way that's healthy, instead of a way that's unhealthy. And in the end of the class we have a mock parole board hearing. I remember I had to sit in front of them. And they're asking me all these questions about why I did this and why I did that. And one of the older guys asked me, he said, "Why are you in prison?" "Because I killed someone." He's like "Yeah, but why are you in prison?" I'm like, "I just told you." And he's like "No, you're not in here because you killed someone. You need to dig deeper and go back and go back and go back and find exactly what it is that led to you killing this person." I didn't understand my emotions when I was younger**.** I didn't really care about my emotions. I remember figuring out that my greed of money is what led me to be in that lifestyle anyway, which led to me killing. So therefore I had to figure out this greed that I had in me and what not. Which comes from having the things I needed when I was younger, but not having everything that I wanted. But I had to learn that, you know, greed is not necessarily a bad thing, but it depends on how, it depends on if you control it or if it controls you. So**,** I had to kind of figure out what I was going to do with that. And, you know, over time and what not, the greed pretty much went away when I understood that, in life, you have to work for the things that you want. Nothing's going to come overnight. It's going to take some time; you're going to have to be patient and let everything work out the way it's supposed to work out. As long as you're putting in the work, then eventually, you'll get where you're supposed to get.

For his part, Theron understands his struggles with his emotions to be part of the masculine world in which he was raised.

Theron: We teach our boys at a young age to not address these emotions and what not. So when things are happening, like we teach them as a society to thrive on violence. Even if it's the war movies, even if it's whatever the case may be. Like, you know, be dominant. But the trauma for me, like, I didn't know or I didn't put a name on it. Like, if you don't know that you're actually traumatized, you're not understanding the trauma like that. Like

growing up in a gang world, seeing the things I've seen. The shootings. The domestic violence. Watching my momma get beat. These are not normal things. Fighting a grown man. That's not normal. So, like, trying to understand that trauma, it has -- gave me a little understanding of myself like: you messed up a little bit. But in the sense that you've been through things that's not necessarily your fault.

Theron shared his thoughts about processing emotions in class one morning.

Theron: I have a hard time being in tune with my emotions. But I also understand that it wasn't healthy, because I'm so closed off based on that, you know what I mean. Because I have this, "I don't gotta show no emotions." But I don't know how to express my emotions, because -- as a result of being tough, being that. And I don't think that was healthy. I think that deprived me from sharing the good sides of me.

Tim: How much better is your life now because you can now show those emotions? Not just in this setting, but in general. How much more wholesome is your life?

Theron: It's better -- and I'm still struggling with it today. Even with the awareness of trying to being expressive, it's still that part, that you spent most of your life cutting it off. And you're trying to re-teach yourself how to really feel, and it's difficult. But the progress that I have made, it is, it's a world of difference. Because I'm not bottling everything up. There's moments, and there's people I'm not afraid to actually speak to. Now this setting is hard, obviously, but this is part of the challenge, right. I'm trying to get this healthy mindset, this healthy ability of what it is to be a man.

Of course, it is not enough just to understand one's emotions; it is also necessary to control them. Here's one of the students, Tim, describing how he struggles with this:

Timmy: Violence has been a part of my life for a very long time, big and small. These days, anybody that knows me from the previous couple decades of my life, as opposed to the last few years, I'm almost unrecognizable. These days, most of the time I just avoid it, but when a confrontation comes and takes place, I always try to have a conversation with myself beforehand of what I'm going to say. People see me talking to myself walking laps -- but what I'm doing is, I know I'm about to walk into a situation where part of me just wants to go knock the dude's head off. And that's what the old part of me, we wouldn't have even gotten to the point of having a conversation. It wouldn't have been an option.

To control emotions can therefore be a means by which violence is reduced. It can also help one pursue a wider range of goals beyond just ensuring one's status on the prison yard.

Cameron**:** When I look back on my decision making, I don't really see it as decision making. Like now, I see a distinct difference in when I'm making a decision now -- like what's happening in my brain and what was happening then. I can clearly see a distinct difference and that's why I equate it so much to brain development.

Herbert: So, elaborate more on that difference.

Cameron: I say all the time, I don't think I actually made a decision in my life until I was 26. Everything just kind of happened, like everything was just going with the flow. Like I didn't really make a choice and weigh all my options and the consequences of those options.

Cameron pushes this idea in a class that he helps moderate, one where his peers are challenged to broaden their perspective about what it means to have a healthy approach to masculinity.

Cameron: We're dealing with a lot of guys that are still very stuck in the toxic masculinity and gang life and everything else. So we're not saying, "You're wrong." We're saying, "Where are these cracks?" I think of it as, like, the first step on a paradigm shift is just questioning these things. So when we say, "What kind of man do you want to be?" often there's some disparity between what kind of man they want to be and then what kind of life they've been living up to this point. "Your goal is to stay out of prison and be a good father? Where does hanging out on the corner with a pistol fit into that, you know?" So just getting them to start those initial questions.

Theron sees things in a similar fashion.

Theron: I always say this saying: We can't be both a great gangster and a great man. And the reason why is because they conflict with each other. The gangster, his loyalty is to the objectives of the gang versus the man's loyalty is to the objectives of his family. So at some point, there will be an intersection that conflicts. You would be a horrible gangster to not go ride with your homeboys at a time where some one of your homeboys got shot. But you would be a horrible dad, a horrible man, to miss your kid's game because you're going to go ride for your street.

No matter how painful these reconsiderations of manhood might be, there is a sense that the pain can be worth it.

Cameron: Examining them things is like legitimately painful, you know. The fact that I feel like I'm a good person but I did all these bad things, you know. And trying to meld the two is a hard thing to go through. A nd my paradigm shift it's, like, it was painful, it was literally painful having those thoughts.

Theron: It is painful when we have to examine the fact that we've hurt people. But the flip side of that, when you do examine it and do allow it to process, then there's those levels of hope. You know what I mean? And the hope of the fact that we are healing, the hope that our pain and our suffering has some meaning to it. As long as there's hope to find meaning, then there's hope to really process the pain.

And, of course, it is not like prisoners never find a way to express their more compassionate side.

Theron**:** I mean, we can look in the visiting room, you know we see guys that go to the yard, they've got kids, reputable guys, you know, tough, stern, serious individuals, they go in the visiting room and they've got these little kids and they're changed because they're vulnerable. In that very moment, they're vulnerable. They're being daddy, they're being uncle, they're being the man. Versus the gangster on the yard or hardened convict, because

they allowed themselves to be vulnerable. So, their violence in the yard, their violence in the past or what not, is irrelevant to their true manhood, which is trying to be the head of their household and teaching real values. Because I think we all can agree that we don't teach our kids the values of prison. Very rare would you see a gang member teach his kids gang values. No one with sense does that. We're going to teach them the real values of what it is to be a man, taking care of the family. So to me that's true manhood. But that true manhood is accepting and being responsible and acknowledging that you can be vulnerable.

So, personal change in prison means bucking the macho codes that say emotional vulnerability is a sign of weakness. To gain control of one's behavior well enough to change means you have to gain control of your emotions. Theron described how this process is key to resolving the disputes into which he is drawn, so that he stays out of the violence that he once embraced.

Theron: But we have a tendency as prisoners to say, "Oh, he made me do this."

Herbert: Right.

Theron: You know, "I didn't have no choice to do this," right? And I've been challenging that, like, did he really make me do this? No, I had a choice. I might not like the options that I have, but I do have a choice. I have the power of free will. He didn't make me feel upset. I chose to be upset based on this other's actions. You know what I mean? So it's playing with that language, to where it's, like, how much -- if he can make me feel the way that I feel, then how much power do I have for myself?

Herbert: Right.

Theron: You know, how much power? So, "He want me to think like this, or he think I'm a sucker." You can think however you want to think!

Herbert: Right.

Theron: I think I'm a good person. I think I got a cool smile, I think I got a lot of positive energy. So regardless of what he thinks, it doesn't reflect who I really am or what I really believe inside. I have that power.

That power that Theron mentions not only enables those trying to atone to be able to control their tendencies to violence. It also makes it possible for them to become positive forces in the lives of others.

Cameron**:** When I realized that I was creating negativity and I was bringing out the worst in everyone around me, that was such a terrible feeling, you know. And why that was a terrible feeling? I don't know, but it was terrible and I had to get rid of it. And what's the opposite of bringing out the worst in everyone around me? Bringing out the best.

How atonement translates into helping others – that's next time on Making Amends.