

Episode One: If I Die Tomorrow, What Legacy Do I Have?

Theron: I am a beautiful person. It's just that I haven't allowed myself to believe that I do have this impact and I do have this beauty within myself and this uniqueness and this impact on other people. I've been having shame about the crime, I've been having shame about all the things that I've experienced and feeling guilty for even wanting to be valued or wanting to have joy, to wanting to have this affection, this love. I felt shame for that.

This is Theron. He's incarcerated at the Oregon State Penitentiary.

Theron: I find myself sometimes where I'm smiling and I see something that's happy and I feel like a sudden panic. And that panic is like, I feel too good.

Theron's like most people in prison – he's from a poor neighborhood where violence is unfortunately too common. He saw violence first in his home, where he watched his mom get beat up by some of her boyfriends. He saw violence again when he joined a gang as a youngster. And he saw it yet again when he came to prison, where fights break out over seemingly unimportant things, like who gets to sit at what table.

So it's not a huge surprise that Theron became good at violence himself, so good that people started calling him Pit Bull.

Theron: And I always joke, like, you know, you got Pit Bull, and that's the street, that's the person that I've become through the means of violence and what not, you know what I mean. And I think this Pit Bull has somehow suppressed Theron. So, Theron has not been able to surface because he always have to embody, you know, Pit Bull and because this is what people expect in this environment. My reputation is what I've done, but my character is who I am. So it's, I think, I'm Theron. And I'm learning that Theron is actually a very compassionate person.

Theron is describing his situation, but his feelings are not unusual. A lot of us feel shame when we hurt other people. And a lot us struggle to feel good about ourselves when we screw up.

So Theron's story seems to raise some compelling questions: Like, what should we feel when we commit a wrong? And when we harm another person, what do we owe them in response?

And then, what if we're in a situation like Theron's, where the harms in question are quite significant? What if we really want to atone for wrongs that are considered very serious -- how might that be possible?

This is "Making Amends." I'm Steve Herbert. I was granted access to the Oregon State Penitentiary, and I got to know Theron and many of his peers.

In this series, I want to explore how they deal with the past and how they search for a way to atone. We'll examine what motivates them to change.

Cameron: There's always that one thing that just starts you on that roll, that snowball, where everything just starts collecting and you start examining everything in your life.

We'll delve into the powerful feelings of remorse.

Moustafa: Knowing the level of suffering that my mother is going through just made me, to a degree, comprehend the level of pain that the victim's mom is going through. And that more than anything just made me realize: what the hell did I do?

We'll look for the kindness that you can find underneath a tough guy façade.

Terrence: Society might think we're all hard and tough and everything else but we're all just men. And we do have compassion. We do care.

And we'll wonder how you carry the burden of a debt that you can never fully repay.

Anthony: My victim's family forgave me, but I can live the best life in the world, change all of the people that I come in contact with, but that still, to me, doesn't tip the scale of justice.

Although this series focuses on these men, it is also about the rest of us. The United States locks up more people than any society ever in history. As we've done this, we've largely ignored the stories of atonement that many prisoners are trying to live. I invite you to hear some of those stories.

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Herbert: If you were to use three adjectives to describe yourself, what would those be?

Anthony: Three, huh?

Anthony is one of the men I got to know at the Oregon State Penitentiary. I conducted several interviews, and I taught a class focused on how we can atone. Teaching is what I do for a living; I am on the faculty at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Anthony: Resilient, resourceful, and open.

Herbert: Okay. So let's unpack those a little bit. Why would you say resilient?

Anthony: Resilient because I've been in the system since I was about eight years old and so just going through everything I've gone through and then looking at who I've become today, you have to be resilient. To the point to where, even at different times when I've had contact with families in society, they've all always said that they don't know how I've done what I've done, as far as who I've become under the circumstances.

If the process of making amends is a journey, then that journey needs a beginning point. So, one thing I wanted to learn was what motivated Anthony and others to get started.

Herbert: So, you said, I think, resourceful?

Anthony: Being that I've been in the system since I was about eight, incarcerated for murder since the age of 15, I've had to learn how to be resourceful in discovering who I am, and maturing and keeping connection with society, and not just strictly becoming a product of my environment.

Anthony's wish to be something other than a product of his environment seems to be what began his journey toward making amends. From a quite young age, his world view was

shaped by a gang in his Portland neighborhood. He drifted that way after life in his home fell apart, and he was shuffled from one living situation to another.

Anthony: I was probably the youngest person in any group home I was in, or foster home. Most of them were littered with gangs, so initially there was a matter of me protecting myself. And sometimes I would get jumped, and so my conclusion from that was joining one of the packs of the kids, which is you know what I call it at this point, which is joining one of the gangs, to get protected. That's what I did.

Herbert: And what does it mean at that age to join one of those groups?

Anthony: At that age, it's just a matter of saying, okay I've got somebody on my side. All of the kids are splintered up into whatever gangs are in the home. And if you're not in one of them, then you become a victim of all of them. And so even at, you know, nine years old, you understand that the best thing I can do is get with somebody.

Eventually, his group became the central focus of his life.

Anthony: Now you've built bonds with people. You've built relationships, and inside of that cultural dynamic it's -- this is what we do. So me and you are friends, me and you are brothers, and because of that you embrace these other guys that are associated with us. And now because of that embracing, you have certain actions and you learn a new way of life.

Herbert: And those relationships, it sounds like, were very important to you.

Anthony: Yes.

Herbert: What do you think you got from them?

Anthony: A sense of belonging, a sense of safety, a sense of purpose, a common vision. Those kinds of things kinda create in you like a military-type bond.

Herbert: And you felt loved?

Anthony: Absolutely. In a crooked sort of way, it was. Like, I didn't have a doubt that if something happened to me, I could go to them and we was gonna get it fixed. If I needed something, the evidence was that they gave it to me, because they did.

Herbert: For example?

Anthony: A place to stay. When I ran away from them group homes, I was staying with my homeboys. When I needed food, they was giving it to me. When I needed a bike, they gave it to me. If I needed a bus pass for transportation, they gave it to me. So, that's parenting in a sense.

Herbert: And what did they expect from you in return?

Anthony: Whatever they asked. I mean it started, hold the drugs, be the lookout.

As he got older, Anthony started committing more crimes. One time, when he was 15, he faced a really difficult situation. A friend asked Anthony to help out with a robbery that was supposed to be easy. But that's not how it turned out. Even with Anthony pointing a gun at him, the targeted victim wouldn't give up the rims off his car. So, Anthony faced a tough choice: he could either run away or he could exercise violence. Neither option was good.

Anthony: Ultimately, I mean, what choice did I have? Run away and then later on come back to my neighborhood and everybody knows I ran away? No.

Herbert: And what would've happened if you had done that?

Anthony: I'd have gotten ostracized and I would have been back at square one. And anything I've done, any credit I'd earned up until that point, it all went down the drain.

The value of his neighborhood reputation was so great that Anthony took the other option he felt he had – he exercised violence. He shot and killed his victim.

Oregon law required that Anthony be treated as an adult in the justice process, even though he was only 15. So he found himself staring at a potential life sentence. He knew he could reduce that sentence if he told the police about his friend. Yet Anthony was so devoted to his gang that he wouldn't violate its rule against snitching. So, wound up with a 25 year to life sentence, and he headed to prison.

Anthony: It's the same thing. I come to prison, who gives me shoes? The Bloods. Who gives me my hygiene and toothbrushes and toothpastes and water pitchers and cups and all the essential things you need to survive in prison? They did. So it was just an extension of everything we were doing on the streets.

Herbert: And what are they expecting of you?

Anthony: Same thing. Something happens, be there. We get in a gang riot, make sure you fighting. When the doors open for yard, make sure you there. Same thing, just without the guns.

Unfortunately for Anthony, punishment for gang fights can include time in solitary confinement. During one of his trips to the hole, he got a letter telling him of the death of an old friend. That friend was killed after his release from prison, another victim of gang-related violence.

Anthony: I kind of started thinking like, huh, this is somebody that I used to stay at their house, sleep in their bed, wear their clothes and all that. And I'm like, he's dead. And that

started making me kind of reflect on, okay, his life is over. I'm in a messed up situation but I still have my life. What do I do from here?

So that's what got Anthony started on his new journey.

Anthony: It kinda makes you start really thinking about life and death, and the reality, like when you ripping and running out there, you ain't really thinking about, "I could die tomorrow." And so, I start reflecting on well, "If I die tomorrow, what legacy do I have? Like all I've ever done is bad shit." It made me start looking at my own situation like, yeah they gave me some toothpaste and some cups and stuff when I came to prison, but ain't nobody from the gang on the outside did shit for me. And my best friend was the only one who I had contact with from the outside. When he was on the streets he would send me stuff and stay in contact and I could call him. And he was gone. Then I started thinking about the situation on my case, like literally, I have the amount of time that I have sitting in here, because I wouldn't tell on and testify against one of my gang friends. But he got 90 months and he's been out of prison now. I was like, this shit don't add up. So I was like, nah.

In class one morning, Anthony described how his outlook changed as he reassessed his situation.

Anthony: And now I don't have an issue if, like, a gang situation broke out, I don't care. Like, there's no, I have absolutely no value in that.

Herbert: Do you have a sense of how that value shift occurred?

Anthony: I mean for me it was just maturing. I was so young. But, now it's more of like, I care more about my own future and my family, what my daughter's gonna say to me if I do something stupid. Going to the hole over a gang fight, I can't explain that to her. She doesn't understand that. Even back when I used to do it, I tried to explain it to my mom. They don't get that. And now it's like, I see that aspect of it instead of caring what my peers think. I don't give a damn what they think no more.

Herbert: So seeing it through the eyes of your family

Anthony: And myself.

In this way, Anthony's journey toward making amends seems to have helped him learn how to open himself up to new ways to live. As you might recall, open was one of the words that Anthony used to describe himself.

Anthony: Open, that's more of a recent discovery. Like, I've been challenged to come to an understanding of different world views and people's ideologies, and not just judge it straight off the rip. And so I've been learning more now that everybody has a back story. Everybody has a narrative you may not be familiar with on the surface. And so, I've been learning more to be open to a person's backstory and narrative.

Theron's backstory and narrative are quite a lot like Anthony's. So, it's not a big surprise that his journey toward making amends began in a similar way. He also got involved in a Portland street gang when his home life fell apart, mostly because of his mother's drug use and her abusive partners. Theron sometimes got beaten himself, when he tried to rescue his mom.

Theron: That hopelessness, that powerlessness, builds the anger. Watching your mother get beat up, then you getting abused. The kids at school were my size, so I wouldn't take they shit at school. That was the outlet that I would find to express this anger and this powerlessness at home and this built up rage. My shoes might not be better, but I can fight better than you. So it's like an equalizer, if you will. So it's like, yeah, I don't got the best pants, but I can kick your ass.

Theron's ability with violence was useful when he drifted into the gang lifestyle.

Theron: I got to live up to an expectation that I don't even really understand yet (laughter). You know what I mean? But I was up for it.

Herbert: So what did that mean in terms of behavior.

Theron: Violence. You got to be violent. I'm ready to fight anyone for whatever cause, like what's up? Let's fight. And then they gave me the nickname, Pit Bull.

The nickname, and the lifestyle, helped Theron feel like he had a place where he belonged.

Theron: That's the toxic belief. That our cause is the all of all causes, you know, and that's what we did. We went and made people respect what we represented. That's the conditioning, the streets conditioned us to believe that we have to make this life sacrifice for something that doesn't really advance us individually or collectively.

Herbert: But that's not how you thought about it at the time?

Theron: No. I wanted to be a part of something, I wanted to be a part of something. I wanted to be respected, for sure. I wanted to be valued, in the sense that, you know, I'm willing to do whatever, man. You validate me, I'm not getting validated at home. Validate me, whatever I'll do.

Herbert: So looking back on that, I mean, how do you make sense of that?

Theron: I think it was some of the dumbest shit ever, honestly. I mean you can't come to an understanding of common sense, when clearly there is no sense in what we do in the streets like that. I mean, what is the sense of shooting this guy because he live on the other side of an impoverished street that neither one of us own? What is the sense of that? What is the sense of not understanding his socio-economic struggle, but I hate him because -- what? But when you grow up and you mature you start to see, like, that is some bullshit.

Like Anthony, Theron ended up committing a senseless murder, one he thought was necessary to protect his reputation. Even though he was only 18, he was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

Theron: I didn't give a fuck. Once I got my life sentence, I didn't care. Like that was my mind, I was going to die in prison. I got life without the possibility of parole. How do a kid, how do anyone for that matter, process that type of information? You know, like, I was just

told that I'm so unworthy to enter society, that I can never return. That I'm going to die behind bars. I don't care.

Theron's use of violence in prison got him time in solitary confinement. That gave him plenty of time to ask himself some questions.

Theron: Why are you angry at the system? You shot that man. Why are you angry at your mother? You got yourself locked up. It's not her fault, you know what I mean. So it was these interesting conversations with myself, like who are you really angry at Theron? Who are you really angry at? You've made this bed. But then it was the educational part. Did you? It is all your fault, you know, and how much blame is on your environment? And then, it was just questions and questions and questions. So I think the transition was, you know, come from hatred, like I hate the system, I hate the system. You know, I hate everyone, I don't care about anyone. Just me, fuck everyone out there. No one cares about me. The pity mode. And then I was like nah, you can't be pitying, why you pitying yourself? Pity is not going to get you anywhere, the anger is not going to get you anywhere. You're still going to be in prison.

Eventually, Theron figured out what he wanted most.

Theron: I want to be free, I want love. I got this love movement. I've hated so much that now I just want to experience love.

In fact, Theron shared this idea with his classmates one morning:

Theron: You know, like, I'm literally telling the hardened guys, "Hey man, I love you" in public! "Hey bro, I love you". And I could tell they're all uncomfortable, "Hey man, what are you talking about?" "Like what's wrong with that?" "Man, you trippin' today." "No man, I love you! I really want to let you know that I love you." "Oh, man get away from me with that bullshit." But it's something that needs to be done. What I'm doing is allowing myself to be vulnerable, because I have a reputation of violence. But I'm really interested in trying to be vulnerable, in the sense of I want to feel this love, I want to be loved, and I want to express that love. But I'm also a leader, so I'm going to lead by example.

One of Theron's classmates suggested he take it one step further.

Ben: If you just walk up and give somebody a hug, that's vulnerability.

Theron: You've got to take it in steps, dawg. We talking about violence and love. You start with the embrace, you get them comfortable with being loved, then you know, it's a phase. There's phases to this stuff.

Theron's interest in love is deeply connected to the sort of person he now understands himself to be.

Theron: I figured something about myself, I like helping people out. Like, that's what makes me happy. I feel really good helping people out, being of service to other people. I don't know how to be selfish, people always joke like, Pit, Theron you don't know how to be selfish. I don't. Like I think of people around me, wherever I'm at.

But still he wonders whether he deserves to feel good about himself.

MAKING AMENDS

Theron: When you experience sadness and pain, rejection, abandonment and all the negative feelings, or loneliness, you get accustomed to these things. So when you get the positive feelings, it's like, I think the panic for me is a fear of A, am I supposed to have this feeling, and the fear of when will this happen again. But you like it. It feels good. Wow, this is cool, but damn how long will I have it? [laughter]

Regardless of the difficulties that he faces, Theron encourages himself and others to keep pressing on.

Theron: If we have the momentum we can't just say, "I just give up." And I think that was a part of our past mentality when we did slip up. The fear of going to the bottom, we just self-destruct. But now it's like, nah man, I fucked up. I made a mistake and I'm gonna keep pushing. I'm gonna try, I'm gonna get back in the fight, I'm gonna get back in the arena because it's what I really want, even though that I've done this or I've done that, this is what I really want. Like I've been numb. I've like, emotionally detached myself, and I want to feel. Like I want to feel that empathy, I want to be able to express the emotions that I feel, identify these emotions, and if I can't do that, I'm still stuck in the same mentality.

So, it seems like it was this desire to no longer be stuck in the same mentality that got both Anthony and Theron started on the path toward making amends. Each of them worked to shed old habits and to acquire some new ones. Each of them was feeling trapped, and in need of a new focus. Anthony found some new values, ones he could defend to his family. And Theron began discovering his truer self, a compassionate counterpart to Pit Bull.

So that's how they got started on the path toward atonement. For others I got to know, a consideration of their victims was the driving force in their new journeys:

Terrence: You really understand exactly what it is that you caused, the pain, the hurt, taking his future, and his dreams, and his hopes. I mean, I have no idea the plans that his mom and dad had for him, but I took those away.

Moustafa: And the mother read out of a statement that she prepared and, uh, there I am sitting, expecting to be told what of a monster I am, and how much hurt I have caused to that family. But what happened was something that I would never have imagined.

How victims help trigger the wish to atone. That's next time, on Making Amends.