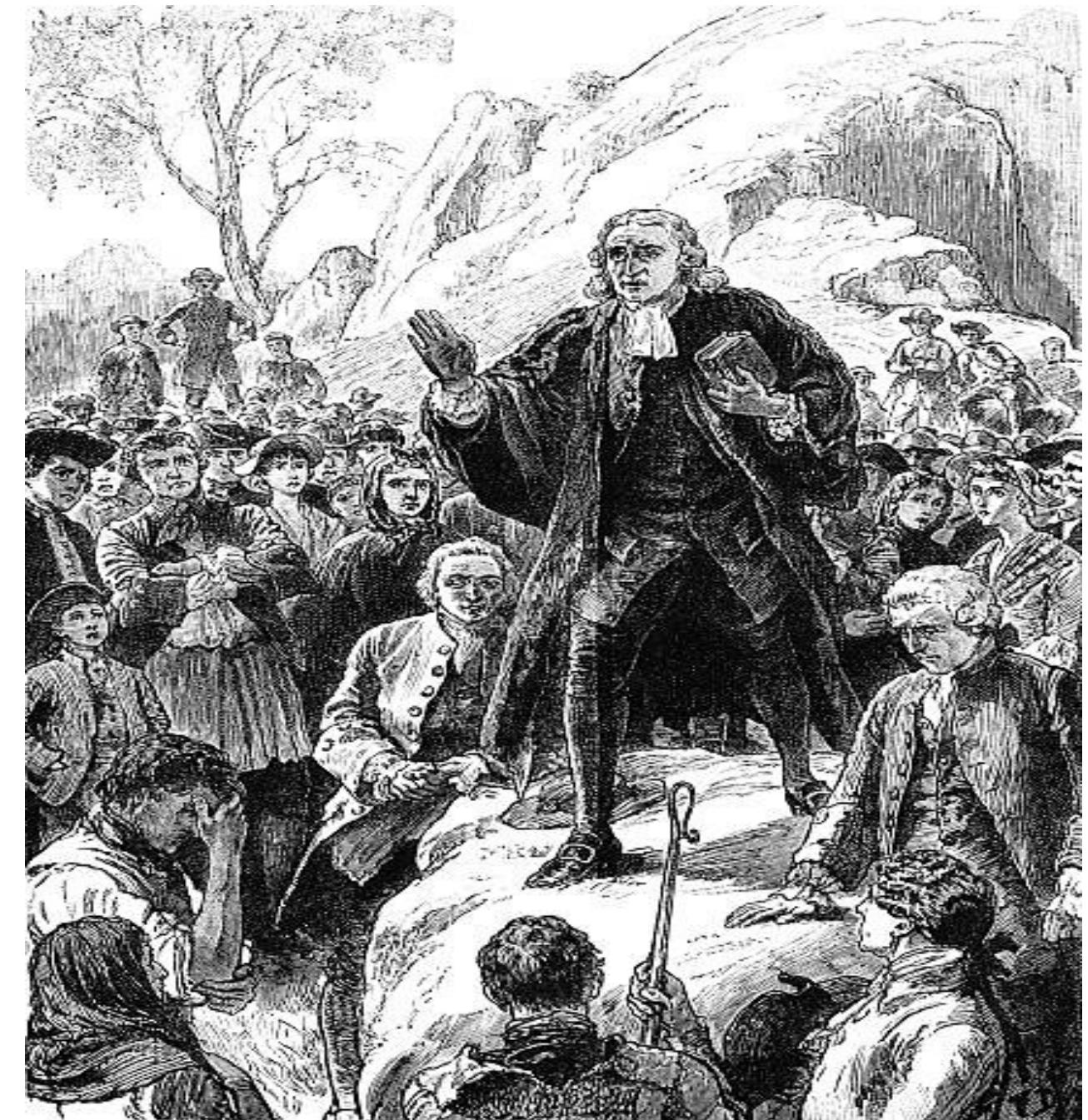


DON'T TELL ME PRISON
SAVED YOUR LIFE

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While laying in my bunk, listening to a radio interview, I heard a man say “prison saved my life”, referring to his time locked up years earlier. As much as I tried to understand his point, I was still bothered by the statement. I've also heard this said when I was in the “free” world, before I became a part of the criminal justice system myself. I kept my mouth shut back then, despite how much the statement didn't sit right with me. Now that I've been sitting in prison a few years myself, I feel comfortable, and at times required, to speak up when I hear someone make the statement “prison saved my life”.

The concerns I have with a statement like this are plenty, but two come to mind right away: it falsely suggest prisons are life-saving institutions and it disempowers the individual who is stating it by giving all credit to the prison, not the individual, for changes made in their life.

Let's further explore the first concern of suggesting prisons are life-saving institutions. Imagine a loved one of yours is struggling with a condition (physical, mental, emotional, an addiction or overall health, etc.) that is threatening their life. Would you suggest they try getting the help they need in prison? The answer is an obvious NO. I think deep down, whether we've been in a prison or not, we all understand they are harmful places. Now, I have no issue with giving prisons credit as long as we do so honestly. Prison culture is responsible for routine dehumanization, isolation, forced separation from family and community, destruction of social bonds, and institutionalized trauma. None of this is good. It impedes an individual from developing and maintaining the full range of human emotions.

Prison culture is low level psychological warfare that deprives the individual more than it gives. Under such conditions, a relationship is not sustainable. Over time the individual will break down (become institutionalized). To think prison is what is responsible for saving your life is absurd. To believe that prison culture can exist without destroying part of the individuals caught in its grasp demands that we be ignorant of the history of prisons and that we deny basic human biology and needs.

So, let's instead acknowledge prisons for offering stunted cognitive and emotional development, fractured relationships, exploitation, violence and domination of the human spirit, and I don't mean any of this in an abstract manner. Show me how prison culture can coexist with a healthy, fully developed human being.

As for the second concern of disempowering the individual by crediting prisons for the change they made in their life, it is equally, or even more, harmful, especially if we are aiming to become more whole human beings. Such statements rob us of our internal connection to our more whole selves and our ability to

change on our own terms, something we are all capable of deep within ourselves. In no way am I implying people don't change for the better in prison, many have and more will continue to. I myself have made personal gains while here in prison, but I've not accomplished any of them because of the prison itself. I developed them through and despite my imprisonment. In no way did the incarceration help me develop. It has not been a good thing. My response to it can be, and has been, good. But the incarceration, absolutely not.

Prison deserves no credit for an individual having the ability to transmute their incarceration into gifts. Only the individual and the people who've supported them are deserving of such credit. So, if you are crediting prison for yours or someone else's change – stop. Not only is it disempowering but, it is also disingenuous and harmful. It lessens the likelihood of the individual understanding that it is they, not the prison, who possesses the power to put a lot of thought into what they feel is right for them, choose to change based on their own internal relationship to the self, and finally, to take responsibility for the outcome of their decisions. This is no easy task, whether you find yourself in prison or not. The difficulty lies largely in the fact that all of us have been conditioned to experience authority as something external to us. This is why it is easy for someone to credit prison with saving their life, rather than developing personal authority and taking full responsibility for their life.

Stated simply, personal authority is the process of discovering what is most true for yourself and then acting it out in the world. It is a sort of refining fire. It burns away everything that distorts or compromises the true person you want to be. It burns away everything that is not you, leaving only your most whole, authentic self. Someone who develops personal authority is not a perfect person, but they are a more whole person, and that is something the prison system will never make you.

If we convince our psyche that we have no internal compass, that authority comes from outside of ourselves, then we confine our lives in a prison of our own making. As Shakespeare noted in *The Twelfth Night*, “No prisons are more confining than the ones we know not we are in”. If you abdicate your authority to something or someone else, it might make you look good in their eyes, but it will never make you whole in your own eyes. Instead, strive to create a connection to your inner self and develop a sense of personal authority that you can rely on. This is an important step to becoming a more free and more whole human being. Sure, this will be difficult, but it will produce a more meaningful life, whether your life is playing out in a prison or not. Who of us would not benefit from assigning more meaning to the lives we currently lead?