

## Life Sentence – What are the Constraints of Your Life Sentence?

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### **FORMAT:**

Whole group writing process and also in groups of 3.  
Duration: 120 Minutes

### **PURPOSE:**

This exercise is about what it takes to reinvent ourselves and to be the leader in those areas of our life that matter to us. The required work will include looking at the not-so-pretty pictures of our lives. This exploration will bring up issues that have been hidden from our view or at least issues that we have been putting off resolving.

### **SETUP:**

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### **INTRO / BACKGROUND:**

Who or what is leading your life? The approval of others? Pleasing your mother or father? Others' expectations of you? Proving yourself to others? Maybe proving yourself to yourself?

This initiation is about taking on some deep work – the kind of work that needs to be done for us to be leaders in our lives. And we really mean being a leader in all aspects of our lives, including at work, in relationships, with family, with community, even with all of society.

Most people live a “thrown” life – thrown like dice – finding ourselves caught up in the situations of our lives, but never really calling the shots. If we take on the challenge of self-invention, we will find ourselves walking down an unfamiliar road. Rather than being led by what has been important to us in the past, we will find ourselves “being” what we are committed to, what we are standing for, what our vision is. We will be ready for leadership roles in our relationships, groups, organizations, and communities, even society.

In all our lives there are moments when we make critical decisions about ourselves that give us an overriding sense of who we are, not just in the present moment, but from then on. Based on the special self-defining nature of these decisions, we see ourselves in a way that limits who we are and what we can do. For us to find the path to something greater, we first need to see the road that's brought us to this point. The decisions that shape our lives live in a conversational environment that includes *There is something wrong here* and *Something is wrong with me*.

## INSTRUCTIONS / PROCEDURE:

### **PART 1: Finding your life sentence**

See if you can recall those pivotal moments when you experienced *something is wrong here*, and *something is wrong with me*. If so, look and see what decision you made to deal with these kinds of situations in the future: a decision specifically about being a certain way, now and in the future, a way you could be that would produce results and make up for what's wrong about you.

Example 1: Maybe as a young child you thought you had nothing to say and then, during a conversation, people suddenly were listening when you quoted authorities. So you knew that quoting authorities was a way to make up for your lack of having anything useful to say. And so your right to say anything became tied to saying what the experts said, instead of what you really thought. So your ability to be a thought leader was suppressed. In lieu of having something to say, you were willing to settle for credibility instead of expressing your points of view. The cost was that you lost your voice).

Example 2: maybe you have the nagging doubt of *I'm not smart enough*, because you made an experience with a teacher who told you in a bad mood that you could not join a certain class because you failed a test. You might have decided the life sentence "to study hard to make up for not being smart enough". However, your freedom to express yourself and provide leadership roles in the class was diminished by this nagging doubt.

The decisions we make that deal with what's wrong about us form the basis of our persona – who we consider ourselves to be. These kinds of decisions are not ordinary decisions, like which movie to see or where to go for dinner. These kinds of decisions are life altering.

This sentence is the decision you make about how to deal with the future in a way that makes up for what is lacking in who you are. This is a lifelong sentence with no reprieve. These life sentences limit and narrow how you occur to yourself, and even how life occurs to you.

The life sentence works exactly according to the design – it helps you survive and gives you a pathway to achieve success (in example 1 you would study with an obsessive work ethic and in example 2 you would channel research to give insights on whatever problem faced you).

What happens if we build our leadership on top of these life sentences? At best, it's limited and inauthentic, a persona, hiding what we believe to be the real truth about ourselves. In example 1 you want to be seen as smart, but whatever you did was on top of not being smart enough. Or in example 2 you wanted to be seen as having something to say.

See whether the same may be true for you: are you trying to be seen as other than you are?

1. Write down a life sentence you have about yourself. (15 Minutes)

2. Get together in groups of 3. Nacktschnecke starts. The other 2 tell the Nacktschnecke what she is trying to be seen as other than she is.

## **PART 2: Seeing into the constraints of Your Life sentence.**

Look around at people trying to be leaders, in all walks of life. If you look closely, you can see the persona they became in a moment of crisis long ago. You can see the life sentence they imposed on themselves, and often you can get a sense of what it covers over.

### For example:

Imagine some people that are (for themselves) shallow, or unpopular, or unattractive, or unlovable. Imagine the kind of compensations that they would have developed: becoming innovative (on top of shallow), stylish (on top of unpopular), hardworking (on top of unattractive), service oriented (on top of unlovable). You can see the glee of having pulled it off, and deep resignation (often in lines on their faces) that it's not real.

1. Now reflect on your leadership experience. In what situations do you see yourself as being most capable of exercising leadership? Add as many situations as you can to your list. Then circle one situation.
2. In what particular situations do you see yourself as being least capable of exercising leadership? Write this down, too. Then circle one situation.
3. Look back in your life for an incident that was wrong, in which you decided that something was missing or wrong with you. This will likely be when you were young or at least still growing up. Somehow you managed to survive and deal with this "bad" situation by doing something new, something that covered over what was wrong about you. Can you recall what you decided to do and how you decided to be to deal with this "wrong" situation? See how you sentenced yourself to the life you are now living – having to be a particular way to make up for "something wrong" about you.

The purpose of this exercise is twofold. First, to see the persona you created as clearly as possible – including where it is effective and where it will fail. Second, to begin to experience the life sentence that gave birth to who you are now. You found a way to survive, and in doing so formed who you are today. The persona seeks to survive in a world in which *something is wrong here*, to look good, to fool others – even to fool yourself. It is built on the foundation of your life sentence.

The other person is who you really are, not bound by the persona. But how do we get beyond the limits of your life sentences?

You can reverse the conviction and release yourself from the prison of limitations. And it takes work.

Here is a list of questions that will support you in finding the incident to work with and then to uncover the script that led to your life sentence:

1. How do you want people to describe you (e. g. smart, funny, articulate)?

2. When did you decide to be this way? Did you have a moment when you realized, *Something's wrong here*? Can you recall a moment when you said to yourself *Something's wrong here with me*? What happened in that moment?
3. What decision did you make in that moment about how you would act in the future?
4. As in a court case, motive is important. What was your motive – your intent – in making that decision and in forming a persona? Was it to survive? To look good? To avoid looking bad? Or something else?

Notice that rewriting the future requires future-based (generative) language. When you use descriptive language, you are trapped by your situation (you are a victim). Only when you see that it was you who made these decisions and judgments about and on yourself can you then overturn the life sentence. If you believe another person did it to you, or the circumstances did it to you, then you have no power. But if you are the imposer of the judgment, then you can revoke it.

Extraordinary leadership emerges from the following question: “if I am not that persona, who am I, really?”

### **PART 3: Creating a crisis – navigate on purpose to the liquid state**

Intentionally create a crisis so that you can transform (navigate on purpose to the liquid state). If you want to transform who you are – how you occur to yourself – then you need to create a crisis of identity, one in which the only way out is transformation.

How do we create this kind of crisis that moves us into transforming ourselves? We do it by focusing on the areas of our lives in which we are inauthentic, those times when we are pretending. Inevitably, these are the areas of our lives, in which we have resigned ourselves to a lack of freedom, joy, and full self-expression. We create a crisis by giving up the resignation and standing for a life in which we experience being ourselves, fulfilled and empowered.

To create your crisis, you need to locate where your foot is nailed to the floor. Here are some questions that can support you in creating a crisis of identity in which the only way out is transformation:

1. Where in your life is something not working or not working as well as you want?
2. In what areas of your life do you feel a loss of power, freedom, fulfillment, or self-expression?

Consider that wherever you experience a loss of quality in your life, there is some inauthenticity at play. Simply said, there is something about which you are pretending, avoiding, something you are not taking responsibility for. Or you've made a decision that makes you right, that gives you justification. In doing so, you give up power, freedom, and self-expression. We hide from others and even from ourselves the game we are playing. This self-deception is at the heart of the trap.

1. In those areas of life you just identified, how are you being inauthentic – what are you pretending, avoiding, not taking responsibility for?

2. What can you see has been the impact, the limitations, of your having been inauthentic in those areas?

The purpose of the life sentence is to produce results through making up for what is wrong with you. But it hides from others and even from yourself who you are afraid you are. It has you pretending that you are different from who you think you are. It even has you pretending that you aren't pretending. This is what the crisis calls you to face.

The way out of the trap is to create a crisis over *being in the trap*. Tolerating any loss of freedom, power, contentment, self-expression becomes unacceptable.

To resolve the crisis, you will have to give something up.

#### **PART 4: What do you have to give up?**

What there is to give up is the certainty you obtain from the life sentence. The life sentence does provide a reliable way to deal with the risk of life. It may be limiting your quality of your life, but at least it seems to world.

To experience transformation – overturning your already-written future and writing it anew – there is one last matter that needs to be addressed:

#### **What are you willing to give up?**

E. g. you probably have to give up safety and risk avoidance, or let go of always having a way out, or give up the fear of having nothing to say, or give up the fear of saying something stupid.

You will see that you, not others, authored who you are. The power is in what you *said* about what happened, not in what happened. In this reexamination of your self and your life, you can use the same power of language that you used as a child to create a new person, unconstrained by the limits of the past. As an adult who is not trying to survive something but who is inventing a life, you can be guided by wisdom.

When we alter how we occur to ourselves, everything around us shifts. Our business associates, our families, even life, show up in a new way. With that new foundation, anything is possible – even a new future.

#### **DEBRIEF:**