

Introduction (1 min)

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AA Liberal Studies, BS Computer Information Systems, Software Development Concentration (Honors), I'm about to begin graduate school for Computer Science in the Fall. I study language and cybersecurity as a hobby. Beyond my academics, I'm also a hardworking and sought after talent in the community. Most employers I work for ask me to stay, but I'm currently chasing my dreams, so I haven't settled into any long-term employment commitments yet.

Not my first time speaking to a crowd. Over the years, I've had people observe me and occasionally ask me to share my opinion publicly. Every time I do so, my hope is that it doesn't fall on deaf ears.

Today I want to talk about violence and forgiveness, and while I'll take a sort of egocentric approach to this using my own testimony, a lot of the humanistic elements I believe are applicable to others as well.

Here's a bit of my backstory:

I grew up in perpetual instability. My parents divorced when I was a toddler. Both were drug addicts. My mother had several abusive boyfriends over the years, and while I knew them all, I grew up mostly living with my father.

I attended 7 schools in 3 different states by the time I was 16, and spent some entire years outside of enrollment. Many times, my family and I lived in makeshift camps in the woods. By my early teen years, I was delinquent and addicted to hard drugs. I grew up with an awareness of violence in my community. People I saw growing up in poverty fought, stabbed each other, robbed each other, set each other up, all of the above.

Reasoning (1 min)

Now that you have a summary of my backstory I'd like to share my experience within the justice system. I was not a characteristically violent person growing up, but at age 21 after enduring decades of abuse, I assaulted my mother's boyfriend and was convicted of a violent crime.

I want to interrupt myself to say to all victims and families of victims, that I offer my condolences for the loss and damages you've experienced as a result of violent acts. I also would like to ask that you reflect on the violence in your own hearts.

Let's talk about forgiveness. Holding resentment and bitterness in your heart towards someone is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.

When I was being sentenced for my crime, I had a good notion that what I had done was wrong. Early on in the process, at age 21 I was willing to take accountability and offered to serve 10 years for my actions. The victim's family wanted me to spend the rest of my life in prison. I ended up being sentenced to 20 years with a 10 year suspended sentence. After my sentencing, the victim's family made threats to my family saying they were going to 'get' me when I got released.

I've forgiven them, along with many others who have wronged me in my life. If I didn't have forgiveness in my heart, I wouldn't be living healthy today.

Conclusion (1 min 30 seconds)

In these last minutes, I want to share a few things about my experiences in prison. An awkward experience for me was having my crime glorified by other men during my incarceration. When I tell people what I did, they often ask me, "did he deserve it?". I try to explain to them that nobody deserves to be violently attacked.

There wasn't a lot of people my age serving 10-year sentences, so my attitude was different than many of my peers. In the prison, it is commonly understood that people serving short sentences are typically more reckless and hold themselves less accountable than people with long sentences, so in trying to live a healthy life on the inside, I chose to live with and surround myself with people who were serving sentences that were longer than mine—typically people who had been convicted of seriously violent crimes.

At first, this was somewhat scary for me, so I'd make bad jokes to my roommates saying, "as long as you don't try to kill me in my sleep, we'll get along just fine."

The misconception is that people who have done something extremely violent are monsters. In fact, many of them know what they did was wrong, and they have spent years in reflection and character development. In my observation over the years, the monsters that exist in society are the people who have not necessarily yet done something so violent, but walk around with an attitude expressing their willingness or eagerness to do so. (hint hint, many of these men and women end up with short sentences or not prosecuted at all)

In conclusion, I want to say a few things. 1. A willingness to have parole shows society's efforts at valuing forgiveness (which I hope is a shared value, as people are fallible). 2. In sentencing for crimes, one thing that is considered is what value society is losing by incarcerating an individual. Many men who have spent decades developing themselves for the better have a lot of value to add, and we don't have to lose this value. 3. Lastly, if you are someone who wants to see a person spend the rest of their life in a box, please consider how malicious and inhumane that is. Maybe see a counselor.

I received the invitation to speak here on short notice, and I haven't reviewed what conditions of parole have been proposed, but I know many of the good men who have been hoping to see this opportunity are eager to abide by whatever standards society reckons to be appropriate to promote safety and comfort in compromise for the greater good. Please be willing to act with forgiveness and encouragement for their continued growth and healing. I believe many of them would serve as great stewards in the community should they be given the opportunity to.