

Cellblocks To Mountaintops
Video Episode 08: True Accountability
Transcript

TEXT CARD:

Willamette University Professor Melissa Buis leads a class discussion with her “inside” students about Danielle Sered’s book, *UNTIL WE RECKON: VIOLENCE, MASS INCARCERATION AND A ROAD TO REPAIR*.

Professor Melissa Buis: This chapter is on accountability. I wanted to point you to page 103. Her main argument is that, you know, prison is not a place that necessarily promotes accountability. “In a fundamental way, what is required in acknowledging the impact of our actions can be harder, even scarier, than prison.” I wanted to ask you what you thought about that.

Theron Hall: We don't have to face our victims. And I think that that idea that prison somehow has hidden us from that responsibility, because it's a difference in like going through the court processes. We detach.

Robert Phillips: You know, having to face like my family and like, and explain to my child, like what I'd done like that was a more painful experience than know, know, incarceration. And I know, you know, on the other side, you know, the family of the, of my victim, I mean, they obviously was going through it worse, then I was.

Mike Wille: For the first 21 and a half years, all I wanted to do was hide behind the wall. I really wanted to reach out to my victims and and have that interface with them and breach the subject of, you know, what I did and how I could help ease their pain and suffering a little bit, if that was even possible. But there is just no avenue to do such a thing without the victims first asking for that process of healing to begin. So, my first reality was at the parole board after 21 and a half years, and I don't think it came across how I really felt. You say you're sorry to the panel. You don't say... you can't turn around and direct your answer or response to the victim. You have to speak to the panel.

Professor Melissa Buis: Because that's part of the rules.

Mike Wille: Part of the rules. So, there was no process, no matter how much I wanted to reach out. And so it made it... it enabled me to hide.

Ben Pervish: No. Remember who it was. But they said the system don't allow you to take accountability, right? And that no matter how remorseful you are, when you first get caught up, you have your lawyer, your family, anyone who care about you, telling you to shut up. You can't speak, you can't do this. And then you get to where Mike is talking about the sentencing phase, where you get to sit and turn and say, hey, I'm sorry. After someone listened to you tell your... whatever version of the truth you told that sorry is kind of watered down. It's like, “I don't care now, I just sat and listened to you talk about what you didn't do”.

Professor Melissa Buis: If you're trying to fight your charges, you mean. Yeah.

Theron Hall: If we don't have the courage or the desire to tell the truth, then how can we really acknowledge the impact of what we done?

Sterling Cunio: Facing the pain that I caused was harder than anything that I experienced in prison. I had to face and acknowledge that from like age 14 to 24, I brought some type of chaotic impact to everybody's path that I crossed.

Anthony Pickens: A lot of people come to prison and do absolutely nothing. Like, you can come do 10, 20 years and don't do anything. Go to bed, wake up next day, do the same thing, get out. And there was no accountability for any of that. What is the purpose of each one of us being sent here? And if it doesn't involve true accountability, then it serves no purpose.

Cameron Hayes: For a long time... like I even wrestled with the fact that I had victims or not. I'm in here for robberies, so I'd go into like a commercial business and take money from the till. So, like, I didn't... I wasn't taking their money or anything. No victims ever showed up to any of my court cases or anything. So, it was like I had like this disconnect with, like, did I even have victims? You know, it felt like I just took money and now they're punishing me for it.

And then in your class one year, we did that exercise where we told a wrong from the perspective of a victim, and that really impacted me, because I was told the story of one of the clerks at the store. And my heart started racing and I started getting an anxiety attack when I was telling the story about pulling the gun, you know, and so that that really made me think, like, I, I did affect these people. you know, I had a person, a personal victim. And you know that none of the criminal justice system even made me acknowledge that I had a victim, let alone I had a responsibility.

Omar Herrera: Like Cameron said during that one year where we did the exercise and I had to put myself in the pain that I caused somebody. Two times that I've had to tell my crime. The most difficult time was to my loved ones, and there in that class. And I don't know if it was just the, the shame of just that. How I could get so far and get to a point to do something to someone like that.

Professor Melissa Buis: If shame is that feeling that you know we want to avoid because it feels so awful, how do you be accountable without falling in the shame pit?

Omar Herrera: Just trying to do something positive and just something good. And just try to just try to live like that as much as possible.

Sterling Cunio: You get to a point to where you always, you always have it, but you just learn how to move forward with it.

Anthony Pickens: Like even talking about the story, it's a teaching moment for a lot of instances. And then it also allows people to see that we can do something so horrific and still do good, and still become something better. Because a lot of people... there was a time where I didn't think I could. Like there was a time I didn't think I could be anything other than what I was.

Cornelius Davis (Key): The scariest thing for me was going to my second trial and dropping my whole defense and just telling the truth. I did feel free in the sense that I didn't have to hide behind anything or lie about my case or be ashamed about that. And I was

able to speak to my sons and tell them to be men of integrity and tell them what that meant to me, and that meant something. So that kind of counterbalanced everything. I think that shame maybe was the driver for the violence in the first place. And when you're accountable for that and you just tell the truth with no excuses, I think that that is that vehicle that brings you up out of the shame.