

The Garrison Institute Presents: Inner Works Podcast Transcript

Susan Olesek and Alex Senegal: The Enneagram & Inner Freedom (Episode 25)

[Please note: Although the transcript is largely accurate, in some cases it may be incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription software errors.]

[00:00:00] **Susan Olesek:** We're in a moment where things, like we often say when we're teaching the descent into personality, it doesn't have to go that way. But sometimes it does. You know, sometimes we have to get all the way to the bottom of ourselves before we recognize, as author Henry Cloud says, we begin to change when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change.

[00:00:27] And circumstances give us the exact thing that we need to make that change. I think we're almost there. Honestly, I am very idealistic by nature. I see the potential in things. I see human potential. I have even learned to stay with my own. And I think that when things are really starting to fall apart, it's an opportunity for us to get extra present and to feel into what wants to happen.

[00:01:06] **Gretchen:** Welcome to the Garrison Institute presents Inner Works. I'm Gretchen Keith-Steidle, Director of the Garrison Institute's Spirituality and Social Change Program, and founder of Circles for Conscious Change. In this series, we explore the impact possible when contemplative practice, spirituality, and inner work are integrated as essential elements of social change programs.

[00:01:32] We'll hear personal stories of transformation, explore innovative models, shifting systems around the world, and learn how the inner work actually works

[00:02:00] Today I'm joined by Susan Olesek and Alex Senegal of the Enneagram Prison Project, or EPP. Susan is the founder of the Enneagram Prison Project and Human Potentialists, and Alex is on the board of the Enneagram Prison Project, serves as its reentry director, and is one of its ambassadors. Ambassadors are graduates of EPP's Compassionate Enneagram curriculum who discovered personal freedom while incarcerated.

[00:02:30] EPP provides self-awareness education and self-regulation training to those incarcerated and affected by the justice system. Their programs use the Enneagram, a psychological system of personality structures, to help individuals recognize the strategies they have unconsciously used to survive and to grow into healthier versions of themselves.

[00:02:52] EPP offers programming from San Quentin Prison in California to Australia, the UK, Belgium, and beyond. Today, we'll explore what shifts when we discover we are all in a prison of our own making, and instead work to nourish the innate goodness inside each of us. Welcome, Susan and Alex

[00:03:20] I'm particularly curious about the values you might have been taught as a kid, and how they've either influenced who you are today or how they've changed as you've come into the place you are now.

[00:03:36] **Susan Olesek:** Thank you for this question. I love this question. I grew up the youngest of four, four kids in five years, and my dad was a single dad from when I was five on.

[00:03:45] So we were a tight little collective, and I think we really learned to rely on each other. We, we- my dad is a Enneagram type three, which we may or may not get into, and he values work, and we worked a lot together. I think I felt so much camaraderie with them. I think I felt a sense of belonging and purpose and safety in that way, and I really think I've oriented a lot in the world because of that.

[00:04:11] And one of the core values that we have in Enneagram Prison Project is that we do the work together, which has many, many meanings. Mm-hmm. But I think that's, for me, that's one of the roots.

[00:04:21] **Gretchen:** Excellent. Well, we will get into that in just a second. But when, when did you start this deeper inner journey, and what is your personal practice, if you have one?

[00:04:33] **Susan Olesek:** Yeah. When do we really start? It's hard to put one pin on it. I will say, because this is pretty central to the work that we do do, is that I come from trauma, as I think everyone does. Mm. And really in a big way for me. When I was five, my mom committed suicide, and that's how my dad ended up as a single dad.

[00:04:55] Now, I've done a lot of work since then about that, but I do think the origin story of anyone kind of comes to some kind of moment, and that's just an easy one to put my finger on because everything turned upside down, and we ended up, uh, in a lot of survival strategies, I think, as people do for a while.

[00:05:16] So I did not start right away. We did not know to get into therapy. My dad didn't know a lot of things. He was trying to survive and keep us all afloat, which he did a mighty job of. I think that it was when I got pregnant with my first child that I started to really, like, in a surprising way, realize how angry I was and how upset I was at little things.

[00:05:42] It was almost like what I was about to do was, like, nudging me, like shoving me maybe back to take a look at what had happened to me as a child. And, uh, I don't- I wouldn't say I did it all that right then either. But these are sort of like touch points and then-

[00:06:00] **Gretchen:** Yeah ...

[00:06:00] **Susan Olesek:** and then as I became a new mom, I think it was such a profound spiritual opening and experience for me.

[00:06:07] I always knew I wanted to be a mom, that I knew it was really important to me to, to parent from my heart and parent from who I am rather than what I had been using to survive all

those years. And that was... It was not a one thing, but it was a slow, gradual process from that point on because I did really start to try to figure it out.

[00:06:29] **Gretchen:** Well, I will say as a fellow mama, these, these little ones are sometimes our greatest teachers. So you are the founder of the Enneagram Prison Project. But before we talk about what you do, can you help us understand a bit more about what the Enneagram actually is?

[00:06:46] **Susan Olesek:** Yeah. The Enneagram is a system. It's a psychological tool, and it isolates, it precisely identifies the repeating habits that we have, habits of thinking the same thing we think over and over again.

[00:07:00] Mm-hmm. A lot of people can relate to that. Or the same way that we're feeling things over and over again, or why, you know, the things that we do, which the thinking, the feeling, and the doing all together we know as personality. So the Enneagram is a system that helps us to understand the repeating patterns we have inside of ourselves, and not just what we do, but the underlying unconscious motivations that precede our behaviors.

[00:07:26] And I learned the Enneagram because I was the kind of mom that wanted to be a better mom. So I got myself into a parenting class, and my parenting instructor was just starting to marry her new work with the Enneagram with the parenting that she'd been doing for many years. So that's how they kind of came together for me.

[00:07:45] **Gretchen:** So then how did you shift into working in prisons, and what does the Enneagram Prison Project do?

[00:07:53] **Susan Olesek:** You know, I wanna say everything I teach in prison I learned in that parenting class practically really, because we get in trouble with ourselves when we are unconscious, and children are beings of light, yes, and very unconscious of a lot of things.

[00:08:06] So as I started to understand what the Enneagram was, I wanted to understand what my kids were. But my instructor kept in- inviting me to consider, well, what's my pattern? And I had not really thought of myself in those ways. But gradually I realized, oh, I definitely have a personality. I, I relate to Enneagram type 1, which is called the reformer or the idealist.

[00:08:28] So that parenting instructor was using a model from the '70s, I think, parent effectiveness training, and the whole premise of the model was that children can be empowered to solve their own problems, and that's actually what they want, right? Children wanna be respected. They wanna be connected. They wanna be safe and secure.

[00:08:46] And so this was, again, the blending of the Enneagram with that model. And to me it was really revolutionary because I had a pretty great dad who did a great job keeping us all afloat, like I said, as a single father, but he wasn't doing any active listening. He was not going to parenting classes. He was just trying to, like, you know, get food on the table.

[00:09:05] And so when I heard it put this way, I thought, "Oh, now that really makes sense." I really loved the idea of inviting children to figure out this question that she would ask us all the time, "Who owns the problem?"

[00:09:19] **Gretchen:** Hmm.

[00:09:19] **Susan Olessek:** And to then take emotional responsibility for themselves, which is all any of us can do.

[00:09:25] And so the beginning of that was, like I said, very opening for me and my relationship with my then, you know, first child and then eventually three children, and really in relationship with myself. So it was the beginning of a lot for me to start to consider what is mine to do and what is for everybody else or for something much bigger than me.

[00:09:48] And my personality as a Type One is to think a whole lot weighs on my shoulders. That's the strategy for the One is to figure out how to be above and beyond reproach. And I had taken all these elements of my early childhood trauma and my early childhood and eventually acted from that premise all the time.

[00:10:08] It was my unconsciously I figured out, oh, that there are so many things that I took responsibility for that were never mine, including my mother's death.

[00:10:16] **Gretchen:** Hmm.

[00:10:17] **Susan Olessek:** And so when you ask that question about, you know, how did that start to inform what I brought to prison, it, it was like all of it, all of it was relevant.

[00:10:25] And I got invited, just invited to go to a little prison outside of Houston, Texas. And I said yes right away, not even knowing what I was saying yes to. And when I got there and I started to try to teach the Enneagram, I, I couldn't help but to find these overlapping elements of parenting and self-awareness

[00:10:48] **Gretchen:** And so I'd, I'd love, Susan, if you could tell me now a bit about what exactly is the Enneagram Prison Project doing in, in prisons around the country and globally now?

[00:11:02] How does it work?

[00:11:03] **Susan Olessek:** Yeah. Thank you. Well, we take this complex psychological tool, and we bring it into places of great suffering with a ton of heart. And I would say, yes, Enneagram is our first name and prison is our middle name, but honestly, what we're doing with it is first creating a circle of psychological safety, emotional safety, and we're infusing that circle with a lot of love and a lot of compassion.

[00:11:29] It's not how we write our proposals to the prison exactly, but that is what we feel is the sort of secret sauce to people being willing to take a look at themselves, is to feel like it's okay to

look inside. And we do that over a 24-hour period, usually anywhere from three hours once a week to a compressed four-day schedule.

[00:11:52] But we have an eight-module curriculum where we start by inviting people to realize that there's nothing wrong with any of us.

[00:11:59] **Gretchen:** Mm-hmm.

[00:11:59] **Susan Olesek:** There's something really inherently good and right and beautiful, and that's what the Enneagram starts with. The essence of personality is, is that we, we come with this, the wisdom of the Enneagram book is our textbook, as it calls it, a little divine spark.

[00:12:17] **Gretchen:** Mm-hmm.

[00:12:17] **Susan Olesek:** And you know anybody who's... If you have a kid or if you've ever seen a baby, you know that that's how we come, and that's what re- we remind people of from the beginning. So we start with that. And that's honestly the harder part is to keep orienting people back to that because there's been so much conditioning to the contrary.

[00:12:36] And in the first circles, we ask people to choose a type and to choose... We introduce how personality is formed and the premise that we come with that I'm describing, and then we ask them, "What do you like about yourself? What, what's good about you?" And I mean, Alex will tell us that's one of the places people really struggle because honestly, many people don't believe anything is.

[00:12:56] They've been told so many times over that nothing is right with them And then we take that circle of safety, and we continue to introduce them to the basic building blocks of personality, which is childhood, and we bring in the adverse childhood experience questionnaire so that people recognize there are a lot of things that have happened to people that should have never happened to them.

[00:13:18] **Gretchen:** Hmm.

[00:13:19] **Susan Olesek:** And importantly, there are things that should have happened that didn't, and that that's not their fault. We talk about how we use our personality to survive pain when it's too challenging to leave our hearts open, and when that's not working, often people turn to something to make themselves feel better, so we talk about addiction a lot and very early on and how we're fiercely addicted to our personalities.

[00:13:42] And then we unfold all nine types in this compassionate forum using a panel method where people tell their stories oftentimes for the first time and listen compassionately to one another, and that's where so much of the healing happens. And we leave people with the invitation to be part of our compassionate community on the inside if they're not getting out anytime soon or perhaps have no plans of getting out, and we invite them to sort of that bridge that we're building to our compassionate community on the outside.

[00:14:16] **Gretchen:** So Alex, I understand you have been through this program, and I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit about your story, how you kind of came to engage with EPP's programs, and how that affected you or transformed you.

[00:14:34] **Alex Senegal:** Huh. Awesome. Well, thank you. Well, first of all, I'd like to say I've been a part of EPP for 12 years.

[00:14:43] I was introduced to the Enneagram in 2014 when I was serving, um... Well, I was fighting my case at this time. I was incarcerated again after being, after coming off of a life sentence, been in the community for 10 years, and the 10 years that I was in the community, I graduated college, became a drug and alcohol counselor.

[00:15:10] I became a mental health specialist. I was a court liaison. I was a deacon in the church. You know, I was all this fantastic stuff in the community, just doing really well, and 10 years later, I caught, uh, a sales case. I did say I was a substance abuse counselor, right?

[00:15:31] **Susan Olesek:** Mm-hmm.

[00:15:32] **Alex Senegal:** Caught a sales case. Who does that?

[00:15:36] I do. And, um, I was married. My wife passed, but I was married, and she told me one day, one day she said, she said, "If I just didn't know you changed, if I just didn't witness and see it myself," she said, "I would never know you had." She said, because every destructive behavior I ever operated with was clicked back on like a light switch.

[00:15:59] **Gretchen:** Wow.

[00:16:00] **Alex Senegal:** Yeah. That's what I said, too. And um, so... And the behavior she was talking about came from, um, from being a gang member since I was 12 years old.

[00:16:14] **Susan Olesek:** 12?

[00:16:15] **Alex Senegal:** Yeah. Being an alcoholic since I was five years old.

[00:16:19] **Susan Olesek:** Wow.

[00:16:20] **Alex Senegal:** Um, having six brothers and sis- Uh, it was six of us. I have five siblings. All of us except for two have different fathers.

[00:16:32] I was raised in a very, very, very, very, very, very, how many very's you wanna add to it, um, violent environment. Extremely violent. And, um, I'm a type nine on the Enneagram, the peacemaker. So my question to that is, how does the peacemaker get on the FBI most wanted list? Yeah. And so I have several, 26 years of incarceration.

[00:17:01] And so when I was introduced to the Enneagram, I was full of shame. I was broken. Um- That was, that was, um That was 14 years ago, and I still feel it right now as I talk. I was

shattered as a individual. And, um, I wanted to know why. Why would, uh, I do all this good stuff? Why would I become all these things and accomplish so much?

[00:17:33] But all the time I did all these things in the community, the only thing I can relate to who Alex was, was the gang member. But I was quiet about it. I was silent about it. I, I mean, I didn't know how to, how to express that, because the only thing I was was a gang member. All these other things was just stuff I did to s- and I thought if I just do 'em, I stay out of trouble.

[00:17:59] You know, I wouldn't go back to prison. But it wasn't who I was, and who I was was a gang member. I just was a gang member not being active in gang activities. And then, um, I had an affair, and I got p- put out the house. My wife put me out the house, and that's when all my survival behavior kicked back in.

[00:18:25] Just kicked back in. And so I really wanted to know why'd I do that. Why, why did, um, of all things, why did I go back to sell drugs when I was a drug counselor? You know? Why would I go back to destroy people's life when I care about people so much? You know, why, why, why would I do that? And so the Enneagram, when Susan gave her little pitch right quick, when I was in, uh, in this program already in custody, she gave her little pitch, and that was one of the things I heard that, that it helped me understand why I do what I do.

[00:19:06] But I didn't wanna go to the class.

[00:19:11] I didn't wanna go to the class because of the symbol, and because of the symbol, I was just convinced wholeheartedly it was a cult. It w- I'm, I can't do it. It sounded good, everything she was saying, but the symbol was really, really, uh, had me with a lot of resistance. But something inside of me, something inside of me just kept saying, "You gotta go to this.

[00:19:33] You gotta go." And before I knew it, I was sitting in the class. Yeah.

[00:19:40] **Gretchen:** So tell us what you learned there.

[00:19:45] **Alex Senegal:** So in discovering my type, there was several parts of being a type nine that made me know that I was type nine, is, um, the go-along to get-along and, um, not being worthy enough. I never thought I was good enough for anything, especially when I look back at all the behavior of, um, all my gang activities.

[00:20:09] So I never thought I was good enough except for Fighting or hurting somebody, that was 125% sure I knew I knew how to do. And so that's how I realized that I would go along to get along because I didn't agree with a whole bunch of things that the gang as a whole went to do or wanted to do, but I would do it because I didn't want to be rejected.

[00:20:37] I didn't wanna be arguing with somebody and having some type of conflict, because Type 9s don't like conflict, which, and so I would just say yes to do something that I did not wanna do. And then also the fact that I would get into a lot of gang fights and people would get hurt, and afterwards people would be boasting about how they did this to this person, how they did that to that person, and I would just get quiet and I would separate myself.

[00:21:06] And, um, so that was one thing, that I would go along to get along, and I didn't like conflict. But more than anything, I was asked a question one day in class, and the question was, "Alex, what do you need?" Whew. They, that day still hits me And I couldn't answer it. I could not answer that question for nothing in the world.

[00:21:37] I did not have an answer nowhere in my body AHA! And I promised myself from that day on that I never, ever, never would not be able to answer that question. And that was the beginning of me starting to learn and understand and pay attention to the most important person I know today, and his name is Alexander Joseph Senegal Jr

[00:22:09] **Gretchen:** Thank you, Alex

[00:22:11] **Alex Senegal:** Thank you

[00:22:16] **Gretchen:** Well, this model is profoundly transformative when you, when you invest the energy to really embrace its, its lessons and learnings, and what an incredible testament to that through your story, Alex. How does it shift in any way the environments that you are in? You know, if you could speak a little bit, either of you, about-

[00:22:46] the current prison system, and how does this even fit into something like that, and, and how might it offer us a different way of being and a different path for people?

[00:23:01] **Alex Senegal:** Yeah, um, it'll change the culture of a prison. I get to be a part of, uh, individuals coming into the class, into the circle, and just really, really have a place where they feel so safe.

[00:23:20] They feel so safe that, um, and even myself, I was, felt so safe that I even was able to go back to areas that hurt, that I was even, um, able to shed a tear. I, I don't care about shedding tears today, but back then, I did.

[00:23:39] And it just opens up people's hearts. And then at San Quentin, there's a community, and there's a large community of people who have taken the Enneagram, and because the larger the community, it shifts the culture of the prison, where all of a sudden you don't have... Not to say you don't have no fights over yonder, but you don't have as much violence in the institution no more.

[00:24:04] You have individuals who, um, start to know themselves, and they cross, cross boundaries. All these prison boundaries, and they're just crossed to the point where some of them don't even exist no more. And

[00:24:18] **Gretchen:** so- Can you say more about that?

[00:24:19] **Alex Senegal:** Yeah. Well, here in California, California institution promotes racism, and that's what it does.

[00:24:27] This person here, this, and be based on your color of your skin. But I've seen the Enneagram have individuals, and I don't care what color you are, which, uh, doesn't matter. None of that matters. And they integrate with each other. They're a community. They are a community. Mm-hmm. They share with each other.

[00:24:46] They support each other. It's like the sky's the limit. It's like this is what community outside of prison is like. And it, you can start it- Mm-hmm ... right there inside a prison.

[00:25:15] **Gretchen:** And now, Susan, you've done this work as well, not just with those who are on the inside incarcerated, but also those who are working within the prison system and also the extended ecosystem around it.

[00:25:31] **Susan Olesek:** Yeah, such a nice follow-up question to what Alex is saying, Gretchen, because just like you're, you're letting us know, Alex, the Enneagram does not discriminate.

[00:25:41] It does not care gender, race, language, age. All human beings, all human behavior is just an attempt to get one need met, and that's the, the need that was so hard for you to answer yourself, Alex. Like, the need to know that we're loved, we're lovable. Yeah. And when we don't think we are, we will do so many dysfunctional distortions of who we really are to try to get that need met.

[00:26:10] And so it is something that idealist that I am, as an Enneagram Type 1, I really see what's possible in human potential. And ever since I first tried out the tool, because I happened to get invited to a prison four times in Texas, it really lit something up in me, like Of all the people who get in so much trouble with themselves, the people who are living behind bars are so deserving of understanding why we do the things that we do.

[00:26:41] And so it, it was an obvious yes to me on the inside, and a, I would say, an obvious thing on the outside because I had been witnessing the prison of my own mind for so many years. And it was really in meeting Alex, and he'll tell you this funny story about the cult, and I'm sure that was true as he stood outside the door with his arms folded.

[00:27:02] But it was Alex's receptivity and his openness that compelled me to stay with myself because I felt that everybody else was worth this tool, but I kept leaving me out. And Alex- Mm ... I think in many ways felt exactly the same. So the more he said yes to me, the more he was saying yes to himself, and the more I saw myself in that reflection.

[00:27:26] And so as we continued teaching and we... The, the first person who really supported the program was a woman named Neelan Wadhvani, and she said, "I didn't know what the heck the Enneagram was about, but I felt your love, and I felt your passion." And that's what she said yes to. But as she then saw Alex and some of our early ambassadors say yes to themselves and started to witness this culture change that Alex is explaining, then the in-custody case managers started to get curious, the people who are- Hmm

[00:27:54] the social workers and the, the psychologists, the mental health that are supporting from the inside. We had, we... She just offered so many other parts of the prison. It was like, "Well, we've got these eight other places where you could be, and we've got 60 guys on this dorm, and this, that, and the other." And we would...

[00:28:11] I would just keep going in and keep practicing and practicing and practicing. And I didn't get to bring Alex with me. I just had to bring my, you know, whatever, my gumption. And, uh, we'd have COs by the door listening, you know, doing their job. And then we asked, "Does anybody relate to this type?" And the CEO would raise his hand and say like, "I think that's me."

[00:28:29] And then we would be, "Great, ask, we'll have questions." And on the way out he'd say, "Can I have one of those blue books?" We said- ... "Of course you can." You know? And then it was just like that, it was contagious. And then eventually we got hired, I got hired to teach some of the, the different staff, some of these people who are supporting from the inside.

[00:28:46] And little by little, and sometimes in big steps, we've found surprising invitations to more systematic pieces of the puzzle. So I was invited to teach the, the forensic psychologists who are those that are writing up the comprehensive risk assessments for people who are going before the board of parole in California.

[00:29:07] And when someone goes in front of a board, they have to demonstrate, this word I dislike but will, I respect, demonstrate suitability and demonstrate that they're suitable to be released into mainstream. And so at their retreat, I was invited to outline our curriculum and what we do with it. And the wisdom of the Enneagram, like I said in our text, one of its major contributions is laying out the Enneagram as a system with levels of development.

[00:29:36] It's like a metric of how present people are, which, you know, being able to measure presence is a pretty subjective seeming kind of thing. Yeah. But they were on the edge of their seats with questions about it then, because if you can measure how present somebody can be, if someone can actually look at nine different levels of development and locate themselves where they were when they committed their crime as opposed to where they find themselves now and where they aspire to be, now I have something to kind of measure myself with, and that was a big change.

[00:30:10] And from there, we then got invited to present our curriculum to the entire board of parole, which has 22, at the time, 22 commissioners plus the executive director. And Alex came with three other ambassadors, or the what we call people who learn the Enneagram while they're incarcerated and then now are taking it up in their real life experience.

[00:30:31] And, I mean, Alex is so impressive, and he has compadres that are equally impressive in their own right and have other lived experience. So I laid out the curriculum, but then four other people punctuated it with how they've lived. And we had sprinkled the wisdom of the Enneagram books and our workbooks up on top of their benches, so they were literally, you know, like above, above them, and they were one by one pulling the books down and asking follow-up questions like, "How can I learn my Enneagram type?"

[00:30:57] And so that just, that was a delight, wasn't it, Alex?

[00:31:01] **Alex Senegal:** That was really awesome. But what makes it even, like, so cool, two of the ambassadors, their commissioners was on that board The commissioners that heard their case, that found them suitable, they were on that board.

[00:31:16] **Susan Olesek:** Mm-hmm.

[00:31:16] **Alex Senegal:** And that was, like, so awesome, 'cause to see somebody that you approved suitable to come into the community and then continues to do good in the, in the community, and you were responsible for them to be in the community, I know what that feels like because I did the same thing with the judge who found me suitable.

[00:31:37] And he, he, he went to tears when he seen me come back.

[00:31:41] **Gretchen:** Wow.

[00:31:41] **Alex Senegal:** Yeah. So that... And that's huge. That's huge. And it lets me see that I have a big responsibility. I have a big responsibility to those who are still there to be given a chance. 'Cause the, the greater I do out here, the more productive I can be out here in the community, the more that people start to change how they view people who are coming from incarceration.

[00:32:08] **Gretchen:** Mm-hmm.

[00:32:09] **Alex Senegal:** And so with me and with this tool of the Enneagram to help me understand that I have to be present to Alex. I can't afford to just, like, not pay attention to me. You know? I just can't afford it at all

[00:32:27] **Gretchen:** So I- I think you're helping us see the multifaceted way in which your program is creating individual transformation, but it's also shifting culture within the institution, and that there are ripples of impact as those who were on the inside are released and are reintegrating within communities, and what that means for their communities, as well as the system itself, as you have this chance to return and to kind of affirm what this work has shifted in the first place.

[00:33:05] So I'm wondering if you can break this down for us a bit around, like, do you have a core theory of change that sort of explains what is happening here with respect to the transformation and the impact you're creating, and what are these core values at work, or how-how's it working? How does this actually take place?

[00:33:33] **Susan Olesek:** Well, I, I think it's such an interesting question, and of course, we have our theories, and everyone has a different vantage point. Everyone is holding a different piece of the system. So I think the really important beginning of it is to recognize that we're all connected, which is what the Enneagram starts with.

[00:33:50] It's a circle, right? That's what the loved one means. Everyone's connected. And the minute I start to think, "Oh, yeah, but I'm, I'm not that," right now, I'm in the duality. I'm in the othering. So when we sat in front of the Pearl Board, we wanted them to know what we've been talking about, that this is a tool for everyone.

[00:34:06] This is absolutely a tool for them, too. If the people who are holding the systems in place because of the power that they inherently hold, or they hold in their role, or with their money, or with whatever, if people recognize that, then they can start to use that in a more conscious way. And one of the, you know, beautiful perspectives that we got was from a commissioner on the board who said that the, the gentleman in EPP, she said, appeared to have developed a really, um, strong internal locus of control.

[00:34:38] These are the- Mm ... psychological words that she put with it. And she said some programs really stress the external, you know, the sponsor, or the meetings, or accountability, or whatever. But she said in the EPP program, it's about internal factors, and this is what I learned in my parenting class. Who is the problem?

[00:34:53] If your kid is having a tantrum, yeah, he's having or she's having a problem. But it can overlap, right? Because that's now also mom's problem. And if someone in the prison is having a temper tantrum like a little kid, because all human behavior is an attempt to get that one need met- Mm-hmm ... and I never felt like I mattered If I never felt like I belonged, if I never even was asked, "What do you need?"

[00:35:17] Then of course I'm acting out my pain and hurting other people. And that is a simple summary of why we have a colossal problem with incarceration in our country, because we have a mental health problem. We have a, a crisis of consciousness, I think. So sh- what she was helping us to see in her reflection back to us is that how we help participants is to recognize the internal factors that developed, and how those issues are actually controllable.

[00:35:46] That's the only thing that we can control.

[00:35:49] **Gretchen:** Mm.

[00:35:49] **Susan Olesek:** Once that shift happens, it's not a permanent thing, but there's a little neural pathway. Like, I can... I know the way to the lake. I've been there once. And then I can go back there, and I can go back there again and again. The more I go, of course, the more- Mm ... I can stay there, and I can rest in something.

[00:36:06] And I mean, we're just des- describing your life work, Gretchen. You know, how do we, how do we do that? We do that in community. We do that in sitting in a circle and remembering ourselves in the reflection of each other.

[00:36:23] **Gretchen:** Thank you. You, you just noted, um, at least four different core values that I am finding

[00:36:42] It, so fascinating to discover across this huge field of organizations that are integrating inner work into social change. So we've, at the Garrison Institute, have been part of launching what we call the Conscious Change Collective. It's a network of hundreds of organizations around the globe integrating inner work and spirituality into their social impact work, of which the Enneagram Prison Project is a member.

[00:37:01] And some of the things we've been looking at and learning about by taking a deeper look at what the core values are of these organizations, so their understanding of how their approaches work, include that we are all interconnected. And you have such a, a clear example of how we can see that, both in terms of the ways that we compensate and act in ways that create harm, but also what shifts when we do recognize our relationship with others.

[00:37:30] Second, that we have this innate goodness and wisdom and value that we can draw upon, and, and when we do that, we can, as you've shared, Alex, in really prioritizing the care for yourself and the recognition of that in you, you can extend that to others, too. You can bring deep compassion and understanding and care for others' innate wisdom and goodness, as well as for the ways we make a mess of things.

[00:38:05] And three, you talk, we, we know, obviously, that trauma is pervasive and is exacerbated by these many systems, but that healing can happen in community, and that you're doing that in a circle, you're doing that within, uh, a system, and you're doing that within a community outside of prisons, and that that is, that has deep ripples for the ways that we relate, um, connect, and support each other.

[00:38:38] And there is the ways in which you operate from this more relational and heart-centered way really supports people in feeling that sense of, of trust, you said, Alex, safety, dignity, belonging. And it's so much easier to, to move into a place of mutual responsibility with each other and with our communities if we're feeling that.

[00:39:04] So I just wanted to, to name some of the, the essence of what you're doing, which is resonating with a lot of other organizations in this space. I'm, I'm wondering if, if, uh, there's anything more you wanna, wanna say about, 'cause I know you connect with a lot of other organizations working in prison systems, if you're finding that that's common as well with the ways in which they're working if they have a contemplative orientation or an inner work process.

[00:39:34] **Alex Senegal:** Well, I, I'll just say that there, a lot of groups, there's, there's some things that we definitely overlap with, but I think there's a missing component in it all, and that's the deliverance of it.

[00:39:52] **Susan Olesek:** Mm-hmm.

[00:39:53] **Alex Senegal:** You see? And, and so Susan, so everybody talks about what Susan did this, Susan did that. No, Susan's... Th- there's the Enneagram.

[00:40:01] But what Susan did do, she found a way to deliver this curriculum to hurting, broken souls to where they felt like what I felt I matter.

[00:40:15] **Susan Olesek:** Hmm.

[00:40:16] **Alex Senegal:** You see? 'Cause before, I, I'll be honest with you, all these years I was in prison, I'd go to a program just to get out of my cell. You know? I, I just didn't care nothing about really what was being taught.

[00:40:28] And then if I did this and I, I learned something about what was being taught, I didn't put it into practice. But Susan found a way to where she delivers this curriculum, and she also teach others how to deliver the curriculum. So it's not just Susan that could do this, 'cause it's a ingredient, and I'm gonna tell you what it is in a second.

[00:40:51] And she found a way To where she made individuals felt like there's more to me. She made me feel like there was more to me, and I wanted to know what it was.

[00:41:03] **Gretchen:** Mm-hmm.

[00:41:03] **Alex Senegal:** And she made me feel like I was important when I felt like I was anything but that. And she shares this, uh, w- I can say we get to share this curriculum today with compassion.

[00:41:20] We share this curriculum with a heart of compassion to where when we say to an individual, "There's nothing wrong with you," the look that I get, I, I expect that look. Mm-hmm. I want that look, so I can show them and explain to them, and then they get to discover what I'm really saying, you know? And for me to say this the way I'm saying it today is a miracle in itself, 'cause there's nothing wrong with none of us.

[00:41:47] But there is some things that happened to us-

[00:41:50] **Gretchen:** Yeah ...

[00:41:50] **Alex Senegal:** that shouldn't have. And there's some things that should've happened that never did. And with that being said, we can go forward. And for me, what it did was it helped me start to develop the things inside of me, my essence, and start to develop that because I had to start inside.

[00:42:08] So I got a quote that I say all the time, I wanna share it now, 'cause I haven't said it today, and that's, "The river of life flows from the inside out."

[00:42:18] Mm-hmm. Meaning whatever I nurture inside of me, whatever seed that I cultivate inside of me, that's what's gonna flow out of me into the community, into the person I'm sharing, into the person that I'm helping. Whatever it is, that's gonna flow. But what that does, it keeps me reminded that I have to cultivate these things inside of me.

[00:42:38] I have to give it to Alex first so that it flows out, and that's how we share with, uh, everyone. And when other individuals start to realize they have this goodness inside of them,

and all they have to do is start nurturing it, and it can flow out, and you'll be this great big difference makers in this world.

[00:42:56] And that's what all of us, it's not just Alex has it, not just Susan have it. We all have it, and if we just start nurturing it, we'll overcome all the madness in the world we have today.

[00:43:29] **Gretchen:** Alex, thank you. That is a profound invitation for each of us to remember. And I understand you now have an offering that is inviting anyone to, to step in to learn the Enneagram through you. Can you tell us more?

[00:43:46] **Susan Olesek:** Thank you for this question. It's so true what you say. A lot of people meet our ambassadors and say, "Wow I want to be like that."

[00:43:53] I want to be able to do that. How do I take this curriculum up? And during the pandemic when we couldn't program anywhere, we began delivering public offerings of our in-custody curriculum with the same compassionate approach, you know, that we're talking about right now. So our newest offering is a little tiny, sticking your, your little pinky finger in about a three-and-a-half-hour program, self-guided tour around the Enneagram called Nine Faces of Potential, that we'll be launching any minute.

[00:44:22] So you can get that on, uh, thehumanpotentialists.com, which is a benefit corporation, a for-profit business that I founded to support social justice endeavors like Enneagram Prison Project, so that people can recognize no matter which side of the bars we live on, that there is a prison, that we are choosing the one that's in our minds, which if we don't go back and look at how to, how do we form one of these strategies in the first place, it's really hard to stop doing those things.

[00:44:50] So-

[00:44:51] **Gretchen:** Mm ...

[00:44:51] **Susan Olesek:** that will be on offer very soon.

[00:44:54] **Gretchen:** Outstanding. And what is the relationship between the Human Potentialists and the Enneagram Prison Project? Yeah. Do they work collaboratively?

[00:45:03] **Susan Olesek:** We work in THP. We are working with ambassadors and with really change-makers, people who want to bring more consciousness into their lives.

[00:45:12] So it's leaders of organizations. We teach organizational teams. It's parents. It's school systems. It's every one of us, and we, like I said, we take that same compassionate approach, and we bring it into any other place that's not falling under the umbrella of our 501[c][3]. And that is a way that people can experience people with lived experience, like Alex and our other ambassadors, are the ones who are leading the centering practices, that are ones that are punctuating what it means to...

[00:45:42] What does pride mean if you're a Type 2? What does anger mean if you're a Type 9? But in their own way, which is so accessible and so meaningful and so applicable, you know. It's not something that is something we've made up. It's about how Alex is describing he has found freedom, how people who are living in prison find freedom before they get out, that I find many people in our courses have done work that people on the outside have never contemplated inside of themselves because I think we feel like we have a lot more to lose, and really, it's the same.

[00:46:15] So it's a bridge for us to allow people to walk across this imaginary divide and to see our own humanity, and it is really beautiful, and it's really exciting, and it's something we've been, we've been up to for the last five years. And it's just now, I think, in this time where our country is honestly going to hell in a handbasket It is a time where just like during the pandemic when we started to offer these courses, people were trapped and stuck at home with themselves.

[00:46:44] Finally, you know, unable to go to the, the, the bars or the, or church or work or any other place and h- having to deal with themselves. That was a real shock point, I think, for people to turn inward. And then when things opened up again, what do you know? Those, those turns inward, people went back to... A lot of people went back to things that were known as we do, as human beings do.

[00:47:07] And now in this next m- set of shock points, I think we're at a place where, uh, we're being, call it what you like, shocked, invited, and you know, given the opportunity to look at what is it that's driving us? Why do we do the things that we do? And to remember that we're all connected and that we're all each other's reflections.

[00:47:29] So that's what these courses are an invitation to, and I think that the world has never been more ready.

[00:47:34] **Gretchen:** Mm. Alex, anything to add about how the inner work works and why this is so essential?

[00:47:46] **Alex Senegal:** So I, I often say, um I, I'm EPP. I- I'm EPP, and the reason I say that is because I, I literally take the, our curriculum, and I make it a living, breathing cell.

[00:48:03] And fortunately, I got the Bible inside of me, too, so I got double dose. But that's basically what it is, is taking this curriculum and bring it, let it live inside of you. Let it live inside of you. It, um, Susan said my word earlier, that I love saying is that, you know, having new neural pathways, just developing the new neural pathways, really understanding my old behavior, being aware of my old behavior, having the courage to say, "I'm operating in my old behavior," a- and, and dig that up and lay down some new tracks.

[00:48:41] Lay down some new tracks with your true essence, having an open heart to be willing to put your pride aside and just humble oneself and just care about the next person. But I can't care about the next person unless I'm caring about myself, you know? And that's what it really

boils down to. When I see individuals who lived the same lifestyle as I lived, and they're out here in the community now, they have taken the classes, and they're doing just as well.

[00:49:14] They're doing just as well, you know, because we're from the inside out. It's just like, you know, you do the work inside yourself, and it comes out.

[00:49:24] **Susan Olesek:** Mm.

[00:49:24] **Alex Senegal:** Rather than finish. So even in prison, once we started in prison behind bars, and we still have a strong community out here 'cause we still stay together. We still meet, we connect, we do things.

[00:49:36] You know, we have a, a camping trip coming up, too. And, you know, and it's a matter of really just doing the work together. Because I often say then, I'd say, I shared with Susan before, I go to classes inside of prison, but A w- a week before I'm getting ready to be released, all that stuff went back here. And, and then in the forefront of my brain was all my survival mode behavior and thinking- Mm-hmm

[00:50:00] and what have you, because I'm, I'm worried about all that. But with this community that we have out here, individuals can get released, contact us, and still continue to be involved with us, and that helps so much.

[00:50:13] **Gretchen:** You help each other. Susan, do you have any data points that you wanna share about the problem you're working on or the impact you're having on it that would help us get a sense of what is the underlying challenges facing incarceration in this country and elsewhere that you're combating?

[00:50:33] **Susan Olesek:** It's a really important part of the problem that we're trying to solve, and it's also a really tricky thing to get access to the data that is meaningful. And people are always interested in recidivism statistics, the rate at which people re-offend. Interestingly, in California, if you commit a crime in one county and serve your time and get out and commit a crime in another county, those two counties are not tracking that in the same way.

[00:50:54] It's not an easy measure. However, what we do issue people when they go in is a 15-question baseline questionnaire to ask people about things like their capacity at self-regulation, their capacity for self-compassion, their emotional regulation, these kinds of things that are really integral to our curriculum, and then we ask them the same questions when they get out, and we are starting to be able to gather and track these things slowly but surely over time.

[00:51:21] One measure that's been really in- interesting is the Adverse Childhood Experience questionnaire. And I am gonna say that, uh, I should be reading the exact statistics so that I don't misquote them, but I will say the majority of people who are in are struggling with the childhood that they are trying to survive, even as adults.

[00:51:44] And so for those who aren't familiar, in the Adverse Childhood Experience questionnaire, they did a survey of, you know, 17,000 people in 1997 between Kaiser and the CDC to measure how childhood adversity affects health outcomes, and they started to notice that, what do you know, the more adversity that people had, the higher their score.

[00:52:05] And so we started to take up the s- same work, and we noticed that on average, the scores for people in custody were much, much higher than those on the outside. And the people on the outside that they were measuring were people that had health insurance. You know, they had jobs. They were largely white, 77%, I think, white.

[00:52:25] And they were still on average looking at one or two ACEs, and often ACEs go together.

[00:52:33] **Gretchen:** Can you tell us at all how you're seeing change on a systems level within prison systems as a result of your work too?

[00:52:42] **Susan Olesek:** Well, one important way, Alex, I think you can jump in with me, is that we have started to offer an advanced course for people who take our initial program and graduate from it successfully one or two or three times, become eligible for a class that we call Connect the Dots, and that's preparing people to go before the board of parole.

[00:53:01] So in our normal, in our regular class, many people have never programmed before, or if they've programmed, you know, may- they've not ever encountered the Enneagram. And when we welcome people into the Connect the Dots class, the very first question we ask is, "Why are you here?" Now, in the first class, that question is, "Why are you picking the class?"

[00:53:19] Like Alex said, "I'm here to burn three hours. I'm here to, you know, get out of my cell." Whatever. We just welcome everybody. In the Connect the Dots class, the first question we ask is, "Why are you here in this institution? What did you do? What is your sentence? How long have you served, and what has that time been?"

[00:53:35] And we ask you to do that in four minutes because we're asking them to begin to really condense their lives into a meaningful soundbite so that they can deliver something meaningful in a present way to the board so that they can demonstrate that they're suitable for release. And often we-- people have not had to do it in that way, so this has been one of the most meaningful applications of our curriculum, I would say.

[00:54:01] Alex and two other ambassadors and I go in weekly. We teach a six-month course, and we drill down into behavior where we touch on things that, that get people triggered, and then we stick around to have the conversation, to do the repair, to revisit what is it that's going on for you right now. Uh, can you be more present?

[00:54:26] I feel when you... Because these things that I learned from my parenting class, and people, sometimes we close with a circle. There's just one word, and every word around the circle is people trying to hold onto themselves, and sometimes us included. And then we come back the next week, and people return to the work, and we, we make the repair.

[00:54:45] We get more present to ourselves. We drop in with more presence. And I mean, Alex, this is, this is some of- Yeah ... the, the, the benefit of having delivered this curriculum for the last 15 years together.

[00:54:58] **Alex Senegal:** Yeah. With the connecting the dots, a individual in that circle, and I say it all the time, has to be brutally honest to themselves, with themselves, about themselves, because we really tighten it down because one of the things that is happening right now with the system, they haven't It's not on paper, it's not a rule yet, but it's a unconscious rule with the commissioners.

[00:55:26] But we're getting it to the point to where we want the commissioners to say, "You have to take the Enneagram Prison Project before you come to the board." Because individuals, they, they, the, the, the commissioners are recognizing the difference with individuals who have taken the Enneagram and those who haven't.

[00:55:45] And especially those who have taken the DOTS class, they come and they are able to really, really get down w- leaving the stories out, leaving all the if, ands, and buts, and get down to the point of what happened with me, what was going on with me, and what I did because of this was happening with me, and go forward and with that, and continue on with a relapse prevention plan.

[00:56:09] Yeah.

[00:56:10] **Gretchen:** Amazing. So what you're saying, I'm hearing that the board is recognizing your work as a critical developmental step in people's readiness for reentry, and the level of support that it provides people, not only within, but also without, is a strength of your community and the kind of transformation that, that it is creating for people and whole communities.

[00:56:39] **Alex Senegal:** Yes. Yes.

[00:56:41] **Gretchen:** Exactly. Amazing. Any last thoughts or messages that you wanna share about your work that's really important for our listeners and where they can find you to learn more?

[00:56:54] **Susan Olesek:** I'm taking a breath with this question because I feel like we're, um, we're in a moment where things, like we often say when we're teaching the descent into personality, it doesn't have to go that way, but sometimes it does.

[00:57:10] You know, sometimes we have to get all the way to the bottom of ourselves before we recognize, as, uh, author Henry Cloud says, "We begin to change when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change." Hmm. And circumstances give us the exact thing that we need to make that change. I think we're, we're almost there.

[00:57:30] Honestly, I am very idealistic by nature. I see the potential in things. I see human potential. I have even learned to stay with my own, and I think that when things are really

starting to fall apart, it's an opportunity for us to get extra present and to feel into what wants to happen. And all we can do is work within ourselves.

[00:57:56] But the more of us that are present to our own light, to our own goodness, to our own sense of belonging, our own, you know, positivity and our, our clarity, our, our wisdom inside of ourselves, the more potential we have. We are greater than the sum of our parts, and I, I think that it's the thing that gives me hope.

[00:58:18] We are not gonna be in this moment forever, but it is a hard one, and I think we're in good company.

[00:58:30] **Gretchen:** Thank you, Susan. Alex,

[00:58:31] **Alex Senegal:** any last words? Yes. Uh, you asked Susan earlier, what are we doing in the Enneagram? And so s- in that circle, I just wanna say, but I've witnessed and, and I'm also a product of deliverance, healing, transformation, and one who was introduced to my true essence. And with that, and because of that, because what I did learn is, had I never been healed from my childhood trauma, 'cause it was my childhood trauma that influenced my behavior, and if I had never been delivered from that, I would still be operating in that same behavior.

[00:59:09] Still wanting to change, still not wanting to go back to prison, still not w- and wanting to live a good life, but I never would've been able to do it, because that pain, my trauma, would've still been there running the motor and running the whole show, influencing all the negative behavior. What they say, hurting people hurt people, I'd have been hurting, and I still been, would've been hurting people.

[00:59:32] But it's the transformation that's taking place knowing that I've been delivered from that trauma and why that trauma happened. You know, my mama didn't have a child to say, "I'm gonna turn him into a alcoholic." She didn't do that. She was, she was dealing with her own trauma, which I never seen before. I never looked at it that way before, and I just blamed her, you know?

[00:59:54] But when I was starting to, when I seen that she was dealing with her own stuff, then I was able to start having compassion for her too, which allowed me to start being delivered from the stuff that happened and quit blaming her

[01:00:09] **Gretchen:** Thank you both so much for sharing your personal stories, the incredible transformation possible through the Enneagram as a tool for inner growth, and the ways in which you are, are bringing the Enneagram to all of us so that we can live our, our true potential as human beings.

[01:00:28] **Alex Senegal:** Yes.

[01:00:31] **Gretchen:** Thank you, Gretchen. It was a real joy to be with you like this.

[01:00:34] **Alex Senegal:** Thank you very much.

[01:00:35] **Gretchen:** Thank you.

[01:00:36] **Alex Senegal:** Enjoyed being here.

[01:00:40] **Gretchen:** Thank you to our guests, Susan Olesik and Alex Senegal.

[01:00:48] Inner Works is a production of the Garrison Institute, and is hosted by me, Gretchen Steidel. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast. Please send us a note at podcast@garrisoninstitute.org and let us know what you think. If you've enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a positive review on Apple Podcasts.

[01:01:09] This show is produced by the Garrison Institute with production assistance by the Podglomerate. Its theme music was composed by Jonathan FP Rose and performed by Jog Blues. We look forward to being with you again soon